



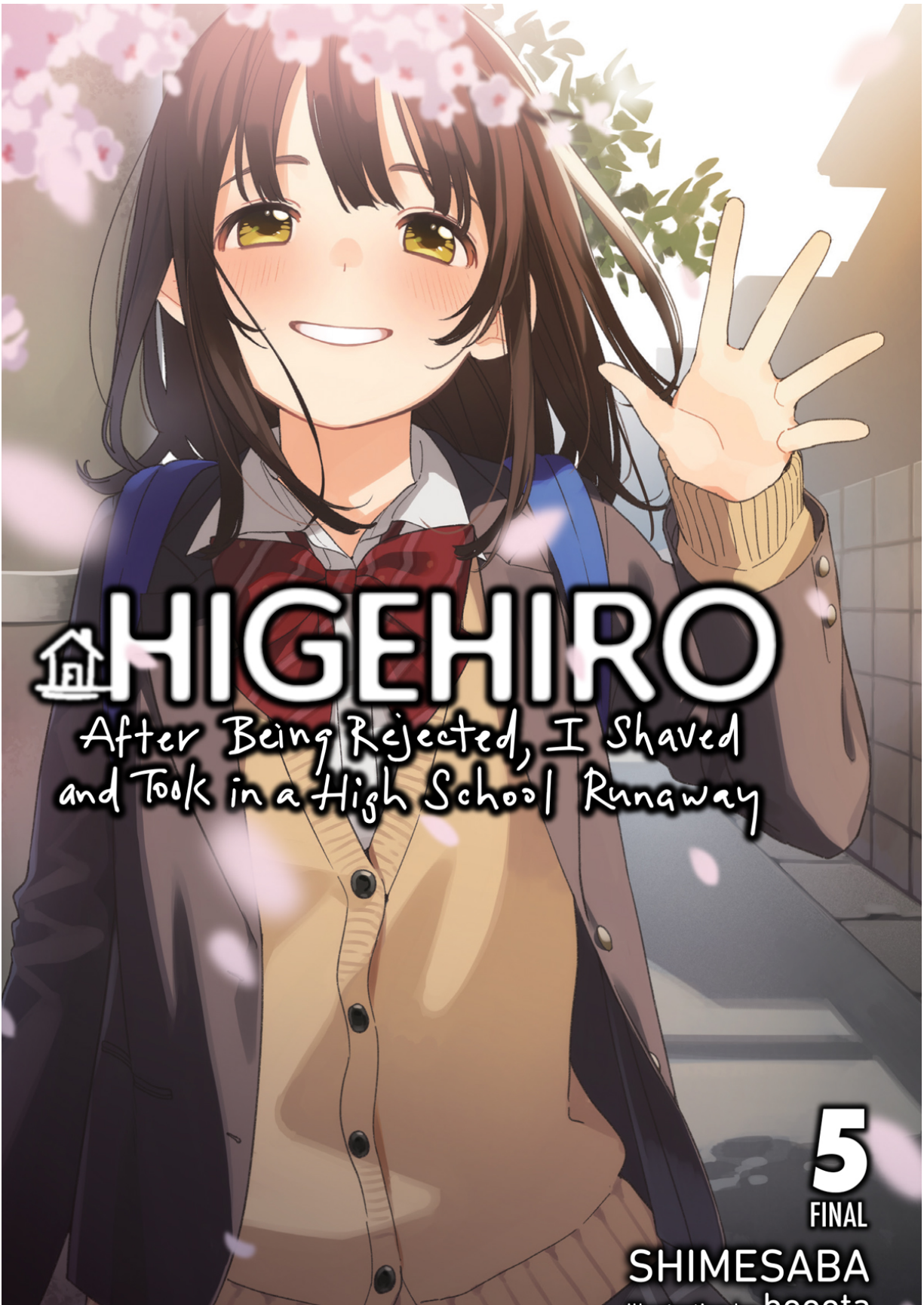
# HIGEHIRO

After Being Rejected, I Shaved  
and Took in a High School Runaway

**5**  
FINAL

SHIMESABA  
Illustration by boota





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SHIMESABA  
Illustrated by boonta



## Sayu

A high school runaway. After meeting Yoshida, she lived with him for more than six months.





"This is the place where it all ended...and where it all began." Sayu slowly got to her feet and lifted her head. "Here I go..." she whispered, taking in a deep breath.  
Then she began to run.

"Huh? Oh... Hē?" I called out. I was in shock. But before I knew it, Sayu had reached the edge of the roof, grabbed hold of the railing with a clatter, and stopped.





"When I did  
housework at  
your place, Mr.  
Yoshida, I didn't  
mind at all."

"Oh?"



"Yeah.....  
Cooking for  
someone I love  
every day made  
me so happy."



They weren't lovers  
or family. Nevertheless,  
the two of them lived  
together for more  
than half a year.



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## 5

SHIMESABA

ILLUSTRATION BY  
booota



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## Shimesaba

Translation by Marcus Shauer (MediBang Inc.)

Cover art by booota

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## Prologue

It was quiet in the car.

The unfamiliar vehicle's peculiar smell of leather and rubber lingered in my nose.

I sat in the back seat, staring at the passing landscape through the rear window. Although we were moving at a decent speed, the ride was smooth. The car was clearly an expensive model.

That was when it hit me.

It'd been about two years since I last visited the house where I grew up.

After getting a job and moving out on my own, I occasionally visited my parents. These visits made them much happier than I would have expected. I didn't think they needed to get so worked up, and it kind of embarrassed me.

In middle and high school, I used to talk to them every day when I came home... I took our relationship for granted. And yet, the moment I left, I completely forgot how to talk with them.

How were they doing?

*I wonder if they're worried about me...*

I gazed out the car window, deep in thought. Gradually, I became so distracted that I almost forgot where I was and what I was doing.

Eventually, I looked over at the seat next to mine. Sayu was there, staring out at the scenery, just as spaced-out as I was. As I watched her from the side, I tried to imagine what was going through her mind, but I soon realized that wouldn't be so easy.

Sayu was still a high schooler, but she'd been away from home for a long time.

And now...she was going back, even though she didn't want to.



As each building and tree flew past outside the car, we inched closer and closer to that dreaded destination.

I couldn't even begin to imagine what Sayu was feeling as she watched it all roll by.

"Hmm?"

As I stared blankly at her profile, she happened to turn toward me, and our eyes met.

She tilted her head to one side like a little bird. Her expression was clearly asking, "What?" But I just shook my head.

"It's nothing," I said.

"Are you sure?"

Surprisingly calm, Sayu tilted her head again in the opposite direction and smiled. As she did, her long hair fell softly on her shoulders.

When I saw this, I realized something.

"Your hair's gotten a bit long," I remarked.

"Huh? Yeah, I guess it has."

After she started working at the convenience store, Sayu had gone to the hairdresser a few times by herself. But I got the feeling her hair had grown out again since her last haircut.

"So you've finally started noticing stuff like that, huh?" Sayu's voice was teasing, and I averted my gaze, unsure how this made me feel.

"It just happened to catch my eye."

"Hmm, if you say so." She hummed in acknowledgment before letting out a snicker. Then, turning to look back out the window, she mumbled, "... I guess I'll get my next haircut at the salon back home."

I was unsure how to reply, but before I had the chance, Sayu continued. "...I wonder if my old stylist still remembers me."

She sounded different suddenly, and her voice was a little shaky.

"I'm sure they will," I said. "You don't just forget someone you've seen countless times."

She'd been on the run for more than six months.

That must have felt like a ridiculously long time for a high school student.

But once you grew up and started working...and you had the same routine every day, six months could go by in the blink of an eye.

“Yeah... I guess not,” Sayu said, still staring out the window. “I hope not, at least.”

Her last few words, like a little prayer, seemed to be sucked out into the scenery beyond the car window.

We were now on our way to Hokkaido.



## Chapter 1 Way Home

“What? You’re coming, too?!”

It was the day after I missed Sayu at the office, causing a huge panic.

When Issa came to pick up his little sister, I explained that I’d taken time off work because I wanted to support Sayu on her journey home. Initially, he looked shocked.

Even from my perspective, that was completely understandable.

I was intruding on another family’s affairs. Just because I’d let her stay at my house didn’t mean I was in any position to meet her mother at their family home—that was preposterous.

However, precisely because of the role I’d played in Sayu’s life, there were some things I felt I had to do.

“I want to be there to support her and give her the courage she needs. And”—I figured I should start by conveying my thoughts on the matter to Issa—“since Sayu lived at my place the longest while she was gone, I feel a responsibility to provide an explanation to her mother.”

I suspected it would give Sayu’s mother some peace of mind to hear how her daughter had spent her time while she was living with me, as well as how diligent she’d been.

Issa silently listened to what I said, and then, after a few seconds of hesitation, he cast a glance at Sayu.

“If I’m being frank, Mr. Yoshida, I am a little hesitant to inconvenience you like this, and what’s more, I doubt our mother will believe your account...” Issa stopped there and looked at me, a weak smile on his face. “But in terms of Sayu’s mental well-being, I think it would be a great help,” he finished, opening the rear door of his car for me.

“Thank you very much,” I said, bowing slightly. Issa shook his head.

“I should be the one thanking you,” he replied.

“Can you tell me the flight number, then?” I said, taking my phone out of my pocket. “As long as I can get a ticket, I don’t care where they seat me.” These days, I almost always bought such tickets online.

Since the plane was leaving the same day, I needed to be quick to avoid it filling up.

Issa, now seated in front, looked over his shoulder as he buckled up and shook his head again, smiling gently.

“Oh, there’s no need for that,” he said, whipping out his smartphone and tapping on the screen a few times. Then he brought it to his ear.

“Hello there. Can you reserve an extra ticket for today’s flight? Yes, on the same reservation. I’d like the closest possible seat. All right, that’s all. Thanks.”

After this brief exchange, he hung up.

“We’ll have a seat ready for you.”

“Um... Who was that?” I asked with a wry smile, though I felt I already knew.

“My secretary, of course.”

“Of course...”

“Yes, you caught me. I’m abusing my power as a CEO,” he said breezily. He then started the car.

Seeing this, I voiced the first question that popped into my head.

“Do you not have a driver...even though you’re a CEO?”

Issa couldn’t suppress his laughter at my blunt question, and he turned around to look at me in the back seat.

“I usually do, but this isn’t a company car. Today I’m out on family business.”

“Ah, that’s true...”

It made sense. No matter how big a company Issa ran, taking a family member back home had nothing to do with work.

I flushed with embarrassment, thinking about what a silly question I’d asked.

CEOs of large corporations *did* have drivers and secretaries, but that didn’t mean they were stuck to them like glue. I must have been reading too much manga or something.

“Sorry. Thank you very much for taking care of my ticket.”

“It’s fine,” Issa replied, completely unfazed. “Consider it a gesture of thanks for everything you’ve done.”

He looked at Sayu and me in turn before continuing. “Let’s head straight to the airport. We should be able to pick up your ticket there and board the plane for Hokkaido...and then we can travel the rest of the way by car.”

After reeling off these plans in a single breath, Issa exhaled.

“It’ll be a fairly long trip. Prepare yourselves,” he said before grinning and stepping on the gas pedal.

The deep rumble of the engine shook my insides for a moment. Then with a *fwoosh*...all the noise and shaking suddenly ceased.

I never imagined that one day I’d find myself riding in a powerful executive’s luxury car on the way to visit his family.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

Just as the car slowly pulled out onto the road, Sayu turned to look at me.

“Are you really...coming with me?” she asked, cocking her head. It seemed like she still hadn’t accepted it as reality, and her expression made it hard to gauge her enthusiasm.

In the face of her gaze, with its mix of expectation and unease, I found myself unable to answer her directly.

“I mean...the car’s already moving,” I replied.

I heard Issa burst out laughing in the driver’s seat. “Should I stop?”

“No, it’s fine! Please keep going.”

Issa chuckled. He was definitely teasing me.

I could feel my face growing hot again as I turned back toward Sayu. “I told you I’d take care of you, right until the end.”

At that, a relieved smile came to her face.

“I see... So you really are coming along,” Sayu whispered, as if turning the idea over in her mind. Then, after a few energetic nods, she announced, “Yeah. I think I feel braver already.”

I watched her say this out of the corner of my eye, then let out a small sigh.

*That’s right.*

*I’m on my way to her family home.*

Much like Sayu, I’d been distancing myself this whole time—thinking about it all like it was happening to someone else.



It wasn't until I'd gotten Issa's consent and the car started moving that it finally began to feel real.

"...All right, then," I mumbled to myself in a voice so quiet that nobody else could hear it.

I was going to support Sayu right up until the very end so that she could return home without any problems. That was why I was doing this.

Determined not to let my resolve waver, I clenched my fists, breathed deeply...

...and, unusual as it was for me, psyched myself up for the coming journey.

## Chapter 2 Airplane

To my surprise, we arrived at the airport in the blink of an eye.

Perhaps because I didn't own a car myself—and thus didn't normally ride in one—I'd always thought they took a lot longer than the train.

Issa pulled into a reserved parking spot.

“Are you just going to leave your car here?” I asked.

“I'll have my secretary come pick it up,” Issa replied casually. He threw in a wink for good measure and added, “I am a CEO, after all.”

“Give me a break...”

*Maybe this guy's a little more devious than I thought...*

Or maybe he'd simply let his guard down enough to joke around with me. When I thought about it that way, it seemed like a good thing.

And our exchange had made Sayu smile.

It would be nice if this friendly atmosphere lasted for the whole journey, but things probably wouldn't be so easy.

The closer we drew to our destination, the more Sayu would have to think about.

I watched her out of the corner of my eye as she followed Issa toward the airport's entrance and decided to do my best not to interrupt her thinking time.

Once we were inside the airport, things went by in a flash. Our carry-on bags were inspected, our luggage was checked, and we boarded the flight in no time at all.

Then, when we reached our seats, I was blown away.

“This...is business class...,” I mumbled.

“Yes, of course,” replied Issa. “It's a long flight. I wouldn't want you to get tired out in those cramped economy seats.”

“But this is way too much to ask...,” I said. Though frankly, it would have been difficult for me to pay for such a seat myself... Issa just laughed as though he saw right through me.

“You’re coming all the way to Hokkaido for Sayu. This is the least I can do. And besides...” Issa paused meaningfully as one corner of his mouth raised to form an affected smirk. “I am a CEO, after all.”

“Enough already. I’m begging you!” Sayu laughed loudly, snagging one of the large reclining seats. “Oh my gosh, this is amazing...! It’s so comfy!” she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

“Why don’t you try yours out, too, Mr. Yoshida?” Issa urged me, and I timidly took the seat next to Sayu’s.

The spacious cushion was neither too hard nor too soft. The only word to describe it was *comfy*.

“This is...pretty great,” I admitted, and Issa nodded with satisfaction.

“Please make yourself comfortable. If you need anything, just let me know.”

With that, he pulled a thin laptop from his carry-on bag.

I stole a quick glance at the screen, and it was clear that he was reading his emails. A CEO of a large company probably had an extraordinary amount of mail he needed to attend to.

And yet, as busy as he was, he had still made time to escort his sister home to Hokkaido. It was clear he really cared about her.

Seeing Issa totally at home in his business-class seat made it clear to me that this man lived in a totally different world than I did.

Sayu, however, seemed excited and nervous at the same time. Her eyes were darting around the cabin.

“Not used to flying business class, Sayu?”

I hadn’t put much thought into this question before I asked it, and the moment it left my lips, it occurred to me that, realistically, no high schooler was likely to be a seasoned business-class flier.

As expected, Sayu shook her head. “This is my first time flying on any plane, let alone in business class,” she replied.

“Huh? Really? I assumed you would have at least flown somewhere on vacation.”

“Nope. We never really did...family vacations.”

Her expression instantly turned gloomy.

I panicked, thinking I'd inadvertently soured the mood, but Sayu was back to normal in no time at all.

"That's why this flight's kinda exciting. But maybe I'm not taking things seriously enough, considering the situation..."

"Nah, I get it. I'm an adult, and I'm still pretty excited to fly business class."

Sayu nodded in agreement, then went back to taking in all the fixtures around her seat.

Without fully taking my eyes off her, I let out a sigh, quiet enough so Sayu wouldn't hear. I knew that I'd unwittingly touched on a dark part of her past, and I regretted not being a little more considerate.

But it seemed she was telling the truth about being excited for her first flight. She was brimming with curiosity as she stared out the window and played with the monitor on the back of the seat in front of her.

It was refreshing to watch Sayu act like the kid she was. Seeing her now reminded me that she was still a child in a lot of ways, regardless of how hard she fought to hide it from the adults around her.

At the same time, I guessed that the excitement of her first flight had allowed her to hold off thinking about what would happen after we landed.

It was difficult to gauge how Sayu really felt. But for now, she seemed to be having fun, and I didn't want to get in the way of that.

Instead, I decided to focus on enjoying my first time flying business class.

I reclined my seat as far back as it would go.

\*

"Whoa, it's so chilly..."

After two hours in the air, we landed in Hokkaido. The first thing I noticed was how surprisingly cold it was.

The temperature in Tokyo was only just beginning to cool off, and so I'd planned to simply bring along a fall jacket. Sayu, however, had repeatedly advised me to take something more suited to winter weather.

"If I'd only brought my fall jacket, I would've been in trouble," I admitted.

"Riiight?" she teased, snickering.



Sayu was wearing a cardigan over her school uniform, a hooded jacket on top of that, and her blazer over everything else, forcefully staving off the cold.

As bulky as this was, she still made it look fashionable. *High school girls really can pull off any look*, I thought.

After we picked up our luggage and left the airport, Issa suddenly turned to Sayu and me.

"I'm sorry. There's a little business I have to take care of. Would you mind waiting here until I'm done?"

His sudden announcement left me flabbergasted.

"B-business?" I blurted out, despite myself.

I'd expected us to head straight from the airport to Sayu's family home.

Issa's expression as he replied was apologetic.

"My company has a branch office in Sapporo. I'm going to drop by for a little inspection," he explained, appearing a bit embarrassed. "Even I can't leave Tokyo without some sort of...work-related reason."

His words reminded me once again that, while he may have been Sayu's older brother, he was still the CEO of a major corporation.

It was clear he took both roles very seriously.

"Gotcha," Sayu replied, jumping in before I had the chance. "How long do you think it'll take?"

"Two or three hours, I suppose. Sorry to make you wait."

Sayu smiled in response to her brother's apology and shook her head.

"It's okay. You've already done so much for us just bringing us here."

Issa's eyes went wide with surprise for a moment, then a pleased smile came to his face.

"If you say so," he conceded with a nod. He turned to me. "I'm sorry, but could you do me a favor and look after Sayu for a few hours?"

"Of course." I nodded. Issa bowed slightly and thanked me. Then he took out his smartphone, making a call as he strode off in a hurry.

"And there he goes..." Sayu said, watching him.

"His job seems very busy, but he still made time to come all the way here for his little sister... He must really love you."

The corners of Sayu's mouth turned up in a bashful smile, and she nodded silently.

## Chapter 3 Café

“Well, then... It’s nice to have some extra time, but how are we going to spend it?” I murmured, standing in front of the airport.

Issa had told us it would take two or three hours to finish his business, so we couldn’t stray too far, or it would be hard for us to meet back up later on.

“Is there anywhere nearby you wanna go?” I asked. “I mean, I don’t know anything about Hokkaido, so...”

“Oh, right, this is your first time. I get the impression you don’t travel much, Mr. Yoshida.”

“You’re not wrong. Since I started working, I’ve only been on company trips.”

“Ah-ha-ha. I kinda figured,” Sayu replied, her shoulders shaking with laughter. She shot me a sideways glance. “Still, there must be some place you’ve heard about, right?”

I hummed, taking a minute to think.

*Hokkaido... Hokkaido...*

Whenever I heard the word *Hokkaido*, I thought of miso ramen and crab... My only associations were food.

“Oh,” I said at last, turning to face Sayu again. “What about...the Clark statue?”

Sayu stared at me blankly for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“That’s famous, sure, but it’s really far away! We can’t walk there.”

I pouted as Sayu cackled at me.

“I heard it was in Sapporo, though...”

“Well, it is. The city’s just that big.”

“Right... Hokkaido’s huge, isn’t it?”

It took a moment for Sayu's laughter to die down. At last, she said, "How about we just walk around, then? Take in the atmosphere... It could be nice."

"...Sure, let's do it. If you spot anywhere you want to visit, just say so. I'll do the same."

"Okay."

We nodded, left the airport, and set off into the city.

Sayu had always insisted that Hokkaido was essentially the boonies, but the area around the airport didn't feel much different from Tokyo.

There were cars everywhere, and the streets were packed with people coming and going.

"This is a proper metropolis, isn't it?" I said.

Sayu snorted. It seemed she found my impression a little naive.

"It's like the metropolitan part of the boonies, that's why."

"Oh... That makes sense."

Her description was easy to understand.

In that sense, the area I lived in was the opposite—way out in the boonies of the big city.

My apartment was a single train ride away from the city center, and the area around the station had quite a lot to offer...or at least, it had all the stores a person usually needed. And yet, a five- to ten-minute walk from the station would bring you to a modest residential area surrounded by greenery.

Based on Sayu's remarks, this city seemed relatively convenient compared to the rest of the region.

Well, maybe it was a given that there would be a shopping district right by the airport.

"What's the area near your house like?" I asked.

"It's a total backwater. Like, the middle of nowhere," she said with an air of amusement. "Well, there's a shopping mall near Asahikawa Station, which sort of makes it feel like a town, but you don't have to go far before you're practically in the wilderness. Most places in Hokkaido are like that."

"I see."

We both fell silent for a while.

As we walked down the street, we took in the air—so much crisper and clearer than in Tokyo.

I felt myself relax as we slowly wandered down the broad sidewalk together.

I thought again...about just how far Sayu had traveled, leaving this place that seemed so unfamiliar to me and making it all the way to Tokyo.

And now she was right beside me.

But when she'd first arrived in Tokyo—no, even before that—from the time she'd set off on her journey, there'd been no one beside her. She'd taken off into the unknown, alone and with no destination in mind.

I couldn't begin to imagine how helpless and anxious she must have felt.

"Oh."

Suddenly, Sayu made a sound, and I turned toward her automatically.

"Hmm?"

"Oh, it's just..." Her gaze was fixed on a shop. "...There's...a café."

"A café...? Do you want to go in?"

I felt like I'd seen the place she was looking at in Tokyo as well, so it must have been a nationwide chain.

"Uh... Yeah, I guess I kind of do."

"That one in particular?" I asked, but Sayu shook her head vaguely.

"Nah, it doesn't have to be that one... I just want to go into a café. Any café."

"Huh... How come?"

The reason didn't matter to me. If that's what Sayu wanted to do, I had no objections. I'd asked only out of curiosity.

Sayu hesitated. She seemed to be struggling to put her thoughts into words.

"Oh... If it's hard to say, you don't have to answer," I added quickly, thinking I may have asked something difficult. But Sayu frantically shook her head, just as flustered as I was.

"No, no! It's nothing like that," she said, shaking her head vigorously. After a short pause, she explained, "...I just haven't been to many cafés before."

"You mean...in Hokkaido?"

"Yeah... Here, and after I left, too. I mean, high school girls are meant to go to cafés all the time, right?"

I couldn't help but laugh at the way she was talking, as if she had no idea what high school girls did.



“Ha-ha, I can’t be sure, but... Yeah, that’s what I’ve always heard.”

Once these words were out of my mouth, a strange feeling washed over me. Sayu may have been a high school girl, but it sounded as though she’d never done the things ordinary girls her age did for fun...like going to cafés after school.

“I guess...we’d better go to a café, then,” I said. Sayu nodded, her eyes glimmering.

“Yeah! Let’s go!”

The gloomy look that had passed over her face instantly disappeared, giving way to a childish expression. This reassured me a little.

I took out my smartphone and tried searching the web.

“Hmm... Sapporo... Airport... Café... Trendy... There we go.”

“Uh, what about that one?” Sayu asked, pointing to the shop in front of us. I shook my head.

“You’re finally going to a café! A forgettable chain like that isn’t going to cut it. We should go somewhere nicer.”

Sayu blinked a few times, dumbfounded. Then she broke out into a smile.

“...Yeah, you’re right! Let’s stop in a trendy café and rest our feet in style!”

“You got it... How about this one? It’s about a fifteen-minute walk away.”

I showed her the café my search had pulled up, and she read through the description.

“It has Scandinavian-style interiors, and the barista makes authentic coffee using carefully selected beans... Looks great! I bet the atmosphere’s nice, too!”

Sayu nodded happily and smiled.

Now that we’d decided, I typed the café’s address into my navigation app and got directions, and we resumed our leisurely walk.

Soon, we’d be heading to Sayu’s family home, where her mother awaited. And yet, I felt strangely at ease.

I stole a glance at Sayu out of the corner of my eye and found that she was the same—she didn’t seem anxious. I’d figured that once she was back in Hokkaido, she’d start getting nervous, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“Oh! That’s it, isn’t it?” she called out.

A building with a dark-brown wooden deck stood in the direction that Sayu was pointing.

“Yeah... I think so.”

The shop was a short walk from the airport and was located down a quiet side road off the main street.

“Wow. This feels like a proper café,” Sayu declared.

Seeing her excited made me smile.

“Well, it *is* a café, after all...” Even I thought my reply was a little silly. As I spoke, I opened the door.

It came as no surprise, considering the stylish exterior, but the shop’s decor was very chic. The walls and ceiling were made of real logs, giving the café a gentle and warm atmosphere, like that of a Scandinavian cabin.

Most of the tables were already occupied, but we were fortunate enough to be taken straight to our seats without having to wait.

Perhaps because of its calm atmosphere, the café didn’t seem noisy despite how busy it was—it would be a good place to relax.

“Wow... I never knew cafés were so elegant,” remarked Sayu.

“They’re not all as classy as this one. I’ve never been to one this fancy before.”

“Really?” Sayu asked, looking surprised.

I furrowed my brow. “Do I seem like the kinda guy who goes to trendy cafés?”

“Hmm, now that you mention it, not really...,” she said, an ambiguous look on her face. “I guess I just assumed everyone went to cafés all the time.”

I watched, unable to respond, as Sayu admitted this with a tinge of loneliness in her voice.

“Welcome, and thank you for stopping in today.”

The waiter had come by with menus and hot, moist towels.

Sayu beamed and took both.

“Hey, what are you going to order?” she asked me.

Her lonely expression from a few moments earlier had vanished, and she was now happily browsing the menu.

“I think I’ll have a regular coffee.”

“Iced or hot?” she asked.

“Hot, I guess.”

When I drank canned coffee, I tended to pick the iced kind. Now that I was at a café, though, I felt like I might as well drink it hot. I wondered why I felt that way.

Even though I was the one thinking it, I never fully understood what I meant by *might as well*. Did I have some reason for this vague notion that hot coffee would provide a richer experience?

As I pondered this, Sayu pointed energetically at something on the menu. She must have made her decision, too.

“I’ll have this!”

“A matcha au lait?” I asked.

“Yep. I thought I might as well get something sweet, since I’m at a café.”

“Pfft!”

I couldn’t hold back my laughter. Sayu cocked her head and made a questioning sound.

“Oh, nothing.”

It struck me as humorous that Sayu had said the very words I was just thinking about, and yet our *might as wells* had led in two very different directions. Smiling, I called out to the waiter.

“Excuse me!”



Once our drinks arrived, we dove right in without a word.

When Sayu took her first sip, her eyes sparkled, and she exclaimed, “It’s so sweet and delicious!” Soon, though, she had completely calmed down, and she was now looking out the window at the scenery, drinking her matcha au lait with a peaceful expression.

The café had a very pleasant atmosphere, with easy-listening folk music playing in the background and the other customers speaking in hushed tones, like the rustling of leaves.

“About what I was saying earlier...,” Sayu said slowly, breaking the silence. “...My brother would occasionally take me to a café, but those are the only times I’ve been.” She was still staring out the window.

That lonely expression was back.

She continued little by little, as if remembering something from long ago.

“Mom would get mad at me if I didn’t head straight home after school, and I wasn’t usually allowed to leave the house on weekends, so...I never even thought about going to cafés when I was in high school.”

She began idly stirring her matcha au lait with her straw as she spoke.

The light-green liquid and the layer of white whipped cream on top began to blend together until the boundary was no longer distinguishable.

“When I came to Tokyo and started wandering aimlessly around the city, I’d see high school girls...on friend dates at cafés.” Her eyes narrowed as she recalled the sight. “I remember thinking, *Oh, right... High schoolers go to cafés, don’t they?*”

The way she said this made my heart ache.

Sayu was a high schooler, too, but she seemed to feel a psychological detachment from “ordinary high schoolers.”

When she first arrived at my place, I often got the impression she was holding back much more than was necessary. However, it wouldn’t surprise me if that was because she’d been suppressed time and again when she was younger. This realization made me feel utterly helpless.

I couldn’t bring myself to say anything, until at last Sayu turned away from the window to look at me again.

Smiling, she said shyly, “That’s why I’m glad...that I could come here with you, not for some errand, but just to hang out.”

“...Really?” I managed to squeeze out a reply. “That’s good, then.”

“Yeah.”

I felt sure that what she’d just said—that she was happy to come here with me—was what she really felt.

After all, Sayu had stopped using smiles to cover up her real feelings.

That said, I hoped that in the future, after we’d parted ways, she’d be able to walk into this kind of place like it was nothing, without any big emotions at play.

Sayu seemed to be enjoying relaxing at the café, occasionally stirring her matcha au lait with her straw like she wasn’t sure what else to do.

I’d initially intended to stay quiet until Sayu decided to say something... but she was so calm that I found myself speaking up without thinking.

“Aren’t you scared of going home?” I asked.

Sayu turned to meet my gaze and blinked a few times.

Then, with a troubled smile, she said, “Of course I am.”



Her response came so easily, I was amazed.

Sayu giggled, unable to stifle her laughter at my surprised look.

“Of course I’m scared. That’s why you came with me.”

“I know that... I just didn’t expect you to be this chill,” I explained.

Sayu smiled faintly and looked down at the table.

Then she nodded a few times.

“That’s true, I am. Now that I’m actually here, I’m calmer than I thought I’d be.” She stirred her drink again. “I’ve always known I’d have to go home someday...”

I kept watching her as she looked down into her glass, where her straw was still swirling around.

“Now that ‘someday’ is here,” she said.

I felt goose bumps rise on my skin.

I was acting like I was worried about Sayu, but in a way, I’d actually been underestimating her.

She’d made up her mind a long time ago.



Naturally, facing the past that she'd run away from was a frightening prospect. But she couldn't keep running away, and she didn't intend to.

If that was how she felt, it made sense that she seemed calm.

"I see... Yeah, okay," I offered meekly. I'd been thoughtless, and I regretted it.

Sayu looked at me and giggled.

"That aside...cafés are great, aren't they?"

"You think so?"

"Yeah. The drinks are delicious, and you can just sit back and pass the time..."

Sayu put her lips to her straw and sucked up some matcha au lait, then smiled.

"I feel like my battery's all recharged. Thanks."

"...No problem."

I nodded vaguely and took another sip of my coffee.

It'd been piping hot when it first came out, but it was already lukewarm.

Now that it'd sat there for a while, it didn't taste quite as nice.

I tipped the small milk pot at our table and added a little to my cup.

The instant the bright-white liquid struck the pitch-black surface of the coffee, it dispersed into a fluffy white cloud, dancing like a waft of amber smoke.

Just watching it gradually calmed me down.

"...You're right. Cafés are nice," I said.

For some reason, this made Sayu very happy. She smiled again and nodded.

"Right?!"

It felt like the most innocent expression I'd seen her make all day, and I couldn't help but grin in response.

Sayu giggled and stirred her drink.

"...I want to do this again someday," she said serenely. "I wonder if going to cafés will ever become second nature to me."

Her wish filled my heart with an indescribable mixture of warmth and sadness.

I took a sip of lukewarm coffee to buy some time to choose my next words, then sighed.

“Once you get used to life here and make some new friends, you can go with them.”

Perhaps this was more of a personal wish than a future prediction. Still, the simple thought of Sayu going to a café to have a fun chat with a friend filled my heart with warmth.

That was what I wanted for her.

“...Yeah, I think so. I hope so,” she said gently, her eyes downcast.

She seemed to fall deep into thought as she began stirring her drink again. Her gaze stayed fixed on the tabletop.

I thought she must be imagining the future that awaited her, in which she’d come and hang out at cafés with people I’d never know.

What we were doing right now was like a rehearsal. All so that one day Sayu would be able to return to an average, everyday way of life. The kind where you went into a café for no particular reason, just to kill time.

“Maybe...I’ll turn into one of those cool older guys who go to trendy cafés on their own,” I said.

I was joking, but Sayu looked at me with wide eyes, clearly shocked by this suggestion.

Her reaction made me start laughing.

“...Nah, you’re right,” I said. “That’s crazy talk.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Right? Pigs might fly!”

Sayu had looked so incredulous, I’d ended up shutting down the idea myself. That seemed to release the tension in the air, and she had a good laugh.

We sipped at our drinks, enjoying a nice moment of calm and relaxation.

But something big was about to change in both our lives...and very soon.

This was the last time that Sayu and I would spend a day like this together.

## Chapter 4 One Step

“Heeey, sorry I’m late. I didn’t expect to get so caught up in things...”

By the time Issa’s car finally pulled up in front of us, more than four hours had passed.

We’d arrived in Hokkaido in the early afternoon, and now the sun was already setting.

“We need to make our way to Asahikawa... So it’ll be night by the time we arrive,” Issa said, frowning.

“Is it all right to barge in so late?” I asked. I was starting to worry. It looked as though I was going to meet Sayu’s mother under less than favorable circumstances.

But Issa simply shrugged.

“Our mother doesn’t go to bed until the early hours. It’ll be fine.”

“Right... Well, if you’re sure it won’t be a problem...”

“Don’t concern yourself with the minor details, Mr. Yoshida,” Issa answered with a smile.

Then a look I couldn’t describe passed over his face, and he muttered, “Besides, getting Sayu to come back home is all she thinks about. I doubt she’ll care what time of day it is.”

Neither Sayu nor I knew what to say to that.

“Still,” he continued, “if we stop to eat before we head out, it *will* be the early hours by the time we get there...”

“Can’t we just grab something from a convenience store?” Sayu suggested.

Her brother nodded, then turned to look at me. “I’m terribly sorry, but would you mind if we went ahead and did that?”

“Of course not. No problem at all.”



“I truly appreciate it. Let’s see if we can find a convenience store nearby, then.”

With the matter settled, we all got into Issa’s car.

Now that we were finally on the road, all that remained was to head for Sayu’s family home.

I tried my best to focus on the scenery passing by outside the window so I wouldn’t notice how nervous I was getting. If *I* found the situation this nerve-racking, how must Sayu feel?

We caught sight of a convenience store before long and stopped to buy a random selection of food and drinks.

Then we set off once more toward our destination.

Issa sucked on a jellied energy drink while he drove and managed to finish it in a single slurp.

Then, as we waited at a stoplight, he asked Sayu a question.

“Is it really okay for us to head straight home?”

Sayu didn’t answer right away.

I’d assumed that we were all planning on going straight there. I looked at Sayu from the side, unable to gauge her intentions.

After almost a minute of hesitation, she seemed to make up her mind.

“There’s somewhere I want to stop first.”

“Where?” Issa asked as he continued to drive. Once again, Sayu fell silent.

When she finally answered, she seemed to struggle to say the words.

“...My high school.”

Issa let a few moments of meaningful silence pass before he spoke again.

“...That’s where you want to go?” he said, asking for confirmation.

“Yeah,” Sayu responded with a quick nod.

Issa let out a deep sigh. “Fine.”

His response was quiet as his hands clenched tighter around the steering wheel.

I side-eyed Sayu once more.

She hung her head, seemingly lost in thought. But a little while later, she looked up and turned toward the car window. She stopped moving altogether, simply staring out at the view.

What was going through her head right now?

A week earlier, Sayu had told me about her past.

To Sayu, high school wasn't a place full of happy memories. In fact, it sounded as though she'd had more bad times than good.

But if that was the case, why on earth did she want to go there now, right before returning to the home she'd fought so hard to escape—right before achieving such an important goal...? I couldn't wrap my head around it.

And yet...

Sayu looked so calm as she stared out the window that I couldn't bring myself to ask.



The car whizzed down the highway, dyed in the color of the sunset.

The road was almost deserted, and there was hardly any traffic. Besides the occasional stoplight slowing us down, it was a nice, smooth drive.

About twenty minutes after we left the convenience store, there were no longer any tall buildings in sight, and we had a good view of the sprawling Hokkaido countryside.

It was a rural landscape. I'd been living in the city for so long, but seeing it instantly made me feel like I was home.

Then it occurred to me—I *was* home. After more than six months, I was back in the place I'd been running from.

Just as Mr. Yoshida had pointed out in the café, I felt strangely calm. That didn't mean my fear was gone, but I'd accepted the reality of it all more calmly than I'd anticipated.

I think I just didn't have the courage—the courage to take that first step.

The first step toward doing anything requires an immense amount of bravery, but once you get it out of the way, you have no choice but to keep going.

It was just that...while I found it easy to move backward, taking that first step forward had required a lot of time...a *lot* of time.

I glanced at Mr. Yoshida, who was sitting beside me, and a small sigh escaped my lips.

I was a coward, and it was clear I had him to thank for giving me the courage I'd needed. I'd only managed to squeeze it out because he'd given me that push.

That's why it was now or never.

I knew I had to settle my past once and for all—for Mr. Yoshida, who'd supported me, and for my own sake, too.

And that wasn't just a matter of seeing my mother and talking it out.

There was something else I needed to do first. I had to properly reflect on what had happened with my friend—the thing that I had always tried so hard to forget—and make peace with it.

I needed to.

To be honest, I was still terrified to go back there. I didn't know if I could handle it.

But...I had Mr. Yoshida with me now.

I felt pathetic for always depending on him like this.

Still...I knew I had to go back there, even if I had to lean on him for support.

If I didn't, then meeting Mr. Yoshida would have been for nothing. I'd have wasted the opportunity he gave me.

As I thought through all this, I stared at the telephone poles flying past as we sped down the highway... And gradually, I felt my consciousness blur as I began to nod off. Eventually, I shut my eyes.

## Chapter 5 School

“We’re here,” Issa announced after bringing the car to a stop.

We’d been on the road for about four hours, and it was just past nine PM.

“You must be exhausted from all that driving,” I said to him.

“Yes, I do feel a bit tired,” he replied, smiling and stretching his limbs.

I looked over at Sayu and found that she was snoring softly with her head resting against the window.

It felt wrong to wake her, but now that we’d arrived at our destination, I didn’t have a choice.

“Hey, Sayu. Looks like we’re here.”

“Mm... Huh?”

“I said we’re here.”

“Already...?”

“It’s been four hours.”

“What? ...Have I been asleep that long?”

Sayu rubbed her bleary eyes and squinted out the car window.

Soon, I heard her gasp.

We were parked outside her old high school.

She spent a few seconds gazing at the school buildings through the car window, the light in her eyes wavering with emotion. Then she slowly opened the car door and got out.

It was late, and there wasn’t a single light on in the school. The streetlamps outside the grounds cast only a faint glow over the area.

Sayu kept staring at the school, an unreadable look on her face.

At last, she calmly announced, “All right, then... I’ll be back.”

Issa and I both looked at her in shock.

“What? You’re going inside?” Issa asked, panicked.

Sayu grinned and casually replied, “Yeah, I know how to get in.”

Sayu’s defiant smile stopped him in his tracks, and while he still looked uncomfortable, he ultimately relented. All he said was “Don’t do anything dangerous.”

At first, I was worried about sending a girl alone into a school building so late at night. But Sayu seemed so confident that it would be fine, I decided she must know better than I did.

Plus, when I took another look at the school, no one else seemed to be around.

I didn’t want to say something unnecessary and shake her resolve, so I decided to keep my mouth shut and see her off...or at least, that’s what I’d planned on doing.

Sayu trudged over to me and grasped my sleeve.

“I want you to come with me, Mr. Yoshida,” she said.

“Huh?” I let out a strange yelp at her unexpected request. “Why?”

“...I’m scared to go alone,” she answered simply, and I sighed, instantly deflating.

It was her old school, but in the dark of the night, it must have looked like a whole other world.

If she was simply scared of walking alone in the dark, she’d definitely be better off with someone by her side.

I looked to Issa to get his permission, and he nodded silently.

“All right,” I said, earning a small sigh of relief from Sayu.

“Okay. I’ll be back soon,” she repeated.

“See you in a bit,” her brother replied succinctly before turning to me.

“Look after Sayu, okay?”

“I will,” I assured him, deeply moved by this show of trust.

“All right,” Sayu said, taking a few determined strides toward the school.

I followed after her, but to my surprise, she passed by the front gate and instead proceeded along the outside fence.

“Aren’t we going through the gate?” I asked, but she just shook her head.

“The school’s pretty tight on security, but there’s still a camera facing the gate.”

“Oh, okay.”

“It’s not like anyone would really sneak in, though.”

“Isn’t that exactly what we’re doing...?”

“Yeah, but we’re not doing anything bad,” Sayu answered breezily, continuing to march around the fence’s perimeter.

As I walked by her side, I scrutinized her expression, but I couldn’t tell how she felt about this visit to her old school. All I could do was speculate.

I repeatedly considered just asking her but decided not to in the end.

If this was what she wanted to do, that was all that mattered. It would be selfish of me to press her for a reason.

So instead, I decided to keep the mood light.

“This would definitely be considered trespassing,” I said, and Sayu cackled.

“You’re right.”

“Why do you sound so chill? Sure, you might be able to get away with it. But if I got caught, it’d be a whole other story.”

“I told you, no one’s gonna be in this Podunk school this late at night,” she replied. Then she shot me a mischievous look. “Besides, your other crimes are much worse.”

“...Can’t argue with that.”

Simply trespassing on school grounds was nothing compared to hiding a high school girl in your apartment.

Both were illegal, but the latter was much more serious.

“Okay, we’re here.”

Before I knew it, we were at the back of the school. I’d been so distracted by our idle conversation that I hadn’t noticed.

“Look at that. I’m so glad they still haven’t fixed it.”

Sayu pointed at a section of the chain-link fence surrounding the back area of the school.

There was a hole big enough for a single person to crawl under. Judging from its shape, it was obvious someone had made it intentionally.

“Students who ditch class in the middle of the day keep expanding it. Now you only need to crouch down, and you can go straight through.”

Sayu demonstrated this as she spoke, slipping into the school grounds easily.

I watched her with an air of detachment. There was no way I was going through that hole. But soon, Sayu stuck out her hand, beckoning me from the other side of the fence.

“Here,” she said. “Hurry up, Mr. Yoshida.”



“Uh, hmm...,” I replied, still hesitant.

I’d never trespassed before. To make matters worse, I had no connection whatsoever to this place.

Seeing how reluctant I was, Sayu snickered in amusement and said, “Come on—you’ll be my accomplice.”

“Don’t try to make it sound like a fun game. I’d rather not break the law...”

Sayu snickered again. “It’s a *little* exciting, though, isn’t it?”

“Didn’t I just say I don’t want to...?”

Sayu’s teasing gradually eased my nerves, and I stopped caring so much. With a sigh, I squatted and crawled through the hole.

*Whatever happens, happens*, I thought.

Once I’d made it across, Sayu shot me a smug smile.

Soon, she was marching off again, less hesitant than I’d expected. I followed after her toward the dimly lit school building.

“If they didn’t repair the hole, then...”

Sayu reached for a door at the back of the school and turned the knob. It was obvious this entrance wasn’t for students.

With a shrill metallic creak, the door swung open.

Sayu smiled again. She seemed pleased.

“The lock on this door is busted. It’s another go-to spot for students playing hooky.”

“Huh...? Wouldn’t most schools fix something like that?”

“People use it to leave during the day, but no one uses it to sneak in at night, so they don’t bother,” Sayu said matter-of-factly, but the school’s sheer carelessness astonished me.

That said, it was lucky for Sayu that the school’s lax security had allowed her to get in so late at night.

I followed her into the school.

Aside from the emergency exit signs, there wasn’t a single light on, and the building was very dark.

“I’ve never been in here at night before. It’s a little scary,” said Sayu.

“...Yeah, this is a first for me, too,” I said, echoing her sentiments.

Although we had each other for company, the dark school building was quite eerie. I could understand why so many ghost stories and urban legends were set in schools.

My right arm suddenly felt warm, so I looked down.

Sayu had linked arms with me.

“.....”

For a moment, I wondered what had come over her. Maybe she didn't want to lose me in the dark. Either way, it didn't bother me, so I silently accepted it.

Without a word, she began walking again.

Slowly, she made her way to a far corner of the school.

I walked alongside her, matching her pace. From time to time, I felt her grip tighten around my arm.

*She must be nervous after all*, I thought.

When she told me she was scared to go alone, I'd taken it to mean that she was scared of the dark, but perhaps I'd been mistaken.

Just as she'd needed to build up the courage to go home while living with me, Sayu wasn't brave enough to come here on her own.

As I thought this, we arrived at a staircase on the far side of the school building.

The steps were just as dimly lit as the rest of the place, the only illumination the moonlight shining through a window at the landing.

“Are we going up there?” I asked.

“Yeah...,” Sayu replied, her voice soft.

“...Where are we heading?”

Now that we'd reached a flight of stairs, I had a pretty good idea of our destination, but I decided to ask anyway.

Sayu was silent for a few seconds before she responded.

“The roof.”

It was so dark inside the school that I couldn't make out her expression, but the tremble in her voice made it easy to tell she was nervous.

“...Right,” I replied simply.

I waited for Sayu to start walking. I felt that if I took the lead now, it would defeat the purpose of being here.

Sayu's grip on my arm tightened.

Then, a few seconds later, she started to move.

She climbed the stairs step by step. I kept pace with her and slowly ascended the staircase. Not a word was shared between us as we made our way up.

In the tranquil night, the sound of our footsteps echoed through the school. *Tip-tap, tip-tap.*

Each step brought us closer to Sayu's past.

I'd only intended to keep her company, but I felt myself steadily becoming just as nervous as she was.

Around the time I came to that realization, Sayu announced, "...We're here."

We'd finally reached the door to the rooftop. Standing in front of it, Sayu took a deep breath, then exhaled.

"Okay..." she muttered, letting go of my arm and moving toward the rooftop door...

But instead of stopping at the door, she went past it and headed to one side of the landing area.

There was a window there. It wasn't as large as a classroom window, but it was still big enough for a person to squeeze through if they folded in their legs.

Sayu placed a hand on the square window and opened it with a clatter.

"The door to the rooftop...has been locked ever since 'the incident,' but this window's lock is broken," she murmured.

Her words had lost the mischievous air they had when we were first sneaking into the school grounds.

"*The incident*" she was referring to must have been the death of her best friend.

I remembered how Sayu had been unable to keep from vomiting when she'd told Asami and me about it, and my heart ached for her.

She took another deep breath.

Then she placed her hands on the windowsill and lifted a foot. To do this, she raised her leg so high, it caused her skirt to ride up. I reflexively averted my gaze.

While I was still looking away, Sayu hopped through the window and out onto the rooftop.

I moved in front of the window and found myself face-to-face with Sayu, who was standing on the other side.

Green light from the emergency exit sign above the door shone down on her.

She was staring at me. I could tell by the look in her eyes that she wanted me to hurry and join her.

And yet...despite having come this far, I was frozen.

This was the place that had changed Sayu's life—it was right in front of me. That knowledge stopped me in my tracks. It didn't feel like I should intrude.

"I..."

As I hesitated to reach for the window, Sayu spoke. Bathed in light, she locked eyes with me.

"Please, Mr. Yoshida."

It was a sincere, direct request.

Her gaze, full of resolve, finally made me realize what both of us were here for.

Sayu was the one most afraid of facing her past—not me or anyone else. And yet, she'd taken the lead and was now standing on the roof, facing me.

As I trained my eyes on her, I saw that, sure enough...she was trembling. She must have been incapable of turning around and facing the rooftop. She'd made that first step, but she needed a little more courage to finish what she'd set out to do.

...I couldn't believe it. Had I already forgotten why I'd come along?

I mentally scolded myself, moving my feet at last.

"I'm coming," I said quietly. Then I climbed through the window.

There was no need to dwell on whether I was meant to be there.

I went because Sayu needed me.

## Chapter 6 Railing

Once we were out on the rooftop, the only light came from the emergency exit sign above the door.

As soon as I turned away from that green glow, everything was pitch-black. It felt like I'd suddenly been thrust into a world of darkness.

Sayu was still facing the entrance.

"Sayu...are you okay?"

"...Yes," she said, but she stayed where she was, trembling slightly.

I breathed a small sigh and stood beside her, not saying a word.

To me, this roof was just like any other.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I began to steadily make out the details of its structure. There wasn't anything special about it—it was just a plain old roof.

However, the railing around its edge caught my attention. It was as high as two people, and the top was bent inward at an angle. It was clearly built to prevent anyone from climbing over it.

That meant...the railing couldn't have been in place when Sayu attended the school.

As I considered this, Sayu began to stir at my side.

I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye and saw as she slowly turned away from the door to face the rooftop.

She let out a heavy breath.

All she'd done was turn around, and she was already panting.

She took a step forward.

"H-hey, are you okay...? Don't overdo it."

"I'm fine," she said flatly, taking another step forward.

Despite what she said, she didn't seem *fine* at all. Her shoulders heaved with every breath as she walked across the rooftop, one step at a time.

I followed behind her, making sure to leave a small distance between us.

Slowly and deliberately, Sayu made her way toward the railing.

Once we'd reached the middle of the rooftop, however, Sayu slumped down onto the ground as if her legs had given out.

"Sayu!"

Just as I was about to run over to her, Sayu said, a little loudly, "I'm fine...!"

I could tell she didn't want me to go to her, so I stopped in my tracks.

"Really, I'm fine...", she said again.

She turned toward me, a weak smile on her face.

I had no words to answer that smile.

Perhaps this was a kind of ritual, and Sayu needed to complete it herself. In that case, I should stay back and watch over her without interfering. But...I couldn't help wanting to support Sayu when she was obviously in so much distress. It was so hard to figure out the right way to stand by her side.

"This is the place where it all ended...and where it all began." Sayu slowly got to her feet and lifted her head. "Here I go...", she whispered, taking in a deep breath.

Then she began to run.

"Huh? Oh... Hey!" I called out. I was in shock. But before I knew it, Sayu had reached the edge of the roof, grabbed hold of the railing with a clatter, and stopped.

I ran after her and came to a halt a few steps behind her.

She hung her head and took great gulps of air.

Once she'd finally caught her breath, I noticed her shoulders starting to tremble.

"This...", Sayu began quietly. "This railing...should've been built sooner."

I felt my chest ache as I listened.

As I'd thought, the railing hadn't been there when Yuuko took her own life. They must have been installed as a safety measure following her death. Adults tended to take action only after something had already happened that could never be undone.



I stood, unable to say anything. When Sayu spoke, her voice was nasal.  
“Yuuko died...because of me.”

I felt a wave of something well up within me when she said this.

I wanted to say something to her. But I couldn't find the right words.

“I wasn't able to understand how she felt. I thought that fighting back together was the right thing to do, but I was wrong.”

I crossed over to stand directly beside Sayu.

She went on, a pained look on her face as she clutched tightly at the railing.

“I was the one...who drove her to do it.”

That was when I realized what I was feeling. What Sayu was saying didn't make sense to me.

Had she really driven Yuuko to kill herself? Weren't Yuuko's last words a request for Sayu to keep smiling?

I didn't know how Yuuko had truly felt, but going by what Sayu had told me, one thing was for certain.

“I...I...,” Sayu stammered.

“Sayu.”

“I should've given Yuuko more. I—”

“Sayu!”

I grabbed her hand, and she looked at me in surprise. Tears were welling up in her eyes.

At last, I knew what I needed to say.

“...It's not your fault.”

The words came to me naturally.

Sayu looked at me blankly, her eyes wide, and shook her head repeatedly.

“That's not true... I...I acted like I cared about her, but in the end, I didn't pay enough attention...!”

“If she hadn't been bullied, you two would have been fine.”

“But I'm the reason she got bullied!” Sayu screamed.

I flinched under the full force of her raw emotions. But I couldn't let the conversation end here.

Unable to back down, I gritted my teeth and continued.

“And she was the one who decided to get closer to you. She looked up to you and wanted to be your friend, so she made it happen!”

“But...that's why—”

“Sayu...” I interrupted her and took hold of her shoulders, shaking her.

I felt a burning in my chest. I had never been so frustrated at my own inability to communicate.

Sayu had lost her best friend, and she was convinced that she was the reason why. She had wrapped herself in the chains of her past, and she could no longer break free. If that didn’t change, she’d spend the rest of her life unable to move on.

“You were both...!”

It should have been a simple story.

And yet, the monumental separation brought on by Yuuko’s death had overshadowed the heart of the matter.

“...You were both...each other’s only friend...!”

Sayu’s eyes went wide, and tears began pouring down her face.

“You cared about each other... You just cared too much.”

“If she cared about me...!” Sayu was screaming again. She squeezed her next words out, her voice hoarse from sobbing. “Then I wish she would’ve stayed by my side...!”

I felt a lump forming in my throat and fought back tears of my own. I couldn’t cry now.

“But if I say that...then that sounds like everything was Yuuko’s fault... It sounds like I’m blaming her...!”

“And that’s okay.”

“No, it’s not!”

“It *is*!” I yelled, startling her.

I knew what I should say, but was I entitled to say it?

Doubts crossed my mind, but I quickly discarded them. It didn’t matter if it was my place or not. If no one told her, the curse she’d placed on herself would never be broken.

“Something went wrong, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. The result can’t be undone. But...”

Holding her shoulders so that she couldn’t get away, I stared straight into Sayu’s eyes.

“Ughhh...,” she cried. She looked terrified.

“It’s...over now,” I told her gently.

Tears streaming down her face, Sayu shook her head. Then she started wailing and shaking her head even more furiously.

I was telling her that her friend's death was "over." Me, who had nothing to do with the other girl or what had happened to her.

Even I thought I was being awfully arrogant.

But at the same time...maybe only someone with no personal involvement could offer her those words. And Sayu was trying to come to terms with her past right here, right now. I wasn't going to get another chance to say it.

"You have to forgive yourself for what happened, Sayu...or you'll never be able to move on!"

"But...!"

I held her tightly with both arms as she continued to shake her head. For a moment, I felt her trying with all her might to wriggle out of my grip. But she soon gave up and buried her face in my chest instead.

"C'mon... It's all right, Sayu."

"Ungh..."

"She told you to keep smiling...remember?"

Sayu sobbed loudly against my chest.

Before long, she slumped to the ground right where she'd been standing. She was wailing like a little kid.

I took her into my arms again and held her until her tears finally stopped.

\*

We must have stayed like that for more than half an hour.

I gazed up at the sky as I listened to her sniffing echo through the silent school. It was cloudy, so I couldn't really see the stars, but the moonlight peeking through the gaps shone brightly.



“...Mr. Yoshida.”

“Yeah?”

These were Sayu’s first words after almost half an hour of crying, and I let go of her to look at her face.

“No, don’t look at me...,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I probably look horrible...”

“Oh... Sorry.”

It made sense that she didn’t want me to see her face, probably red from all the crying. I quickly averted my gaze.

She sniffled again.

“...I’m really glad you’re here, Mr. Yoshida. If I’d come by myself...I think I would’ve lost it.”

When I heard this, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“...I’m glad I came with you, then,” I replied, and she snickered for the first time in what felt like forever.

Then she slowly rose to her feet. I followed suit and stood up as well.

She was silent for a little while, standing there on the rooftop.

Then, squinting, as if she was gazing through to the other side of the railing, Sayu murmured, “See you...Yuuko.”

Her quiet farewell seemed to coast over the rooftop for a moment, then drifted away with the wind.

“...Let’s head back,” she said, turning on her heel.

She looked like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. I felt somehow lighter, too.

“Okay,” I said and followed her to the door leading back downstairs.

We crawled in through the window, then shut it behind us.

As Sayu descended, I noticed her steps were lighter than they’d been on her way up.

“Are you okay now?” I called out to her from behind.

She turned to face me and grimaced.

“Not at all,” she said, shaking her head.

“Yeah, I guess not...”

It wouldn’t be so easy for her to lay down her burden and forget everything that had happened. If it were, then she wouldn’t have suffered for so long.

There were some wounds only time could heal.

“But...I think I’m ready to face things properly now.”

Her voice was quiet, but her words were brimming with determination.

“I think I’m gonna try to remember everything I can about Yuuko,” she said, smiling slightly.

“Until, one day, I can think of her...and smile.”

The light shining in from the window by the stairs illuminated half of Sayu’s body. She looked so astonishingly beautiful as she stood there smiling that I gasped.

Then, bit by bit, her words began to sink in.

“Yeah...,” I said. I could feel tears bubble up inside me, but I held them back and continued. “I hope that day is almost here.”

I felt sure Sayu had already drawn a line between her past and her present.



## Chapter 7 Slap

We exited the same way we'd come, then returned to the front gate.

"That took quite a while," said Issa. He'd been waiting in front of his car.

But he must have noticed the redness around Sayu's eyes, because he didn't say anything else as he settled into the driver's seat.

Sayu and I piled into the back.

*Phewww...* Sayu heaved a great sigh.

"...You okay?" I asked, and Sayu nodded slowly.

"Yeah. I'm all right."

Issa buckled up and turned around to look at Sayu.

"So... We can head home now, right?" he asked her.

Sayu gulped and hesitated for a moment. Then she dipped her head low in a nod.

"Yeah... Let's go."

"All right," Issa said quietly, nodding back. Then he turned the key to start the engine.

From that point on, all three of us were silent.

The tension weighed on everyone—not just Sayu, but Issa and me, too.

Sayu's stories had given me all kinds of ideas about what her mother might be like. But at the end of the day, the only thing I knew about her was that she'd treated her daughter harshly.

The more I imagined the kind of verbal abuse Sayu would endure when she got home, the more terrified I became. I just hoped that if things went too far, I'd be able to protect her as an adult.

I was still skeptical about whether I'd be allowed inside at all... But if I was, I would do what I could. As an outsider, I felt there were some things that only I could say, and it would be my job to say them.

As always, I remained uncertain about my place in Sayu's life. I might have been an outsider, but we'd also developed a close relationship through living together for so long.

There had to be something that only I could do for her.

After about ten minutes on the road, we entered a quiet residential area, and soon after, the car came to a stop.

"We're here," said Issa. He was the first to get out.

I followed suit, then took a look at the house standing in front of us.

It was a stylish, white, detached home with two stories—not a huge mansion but not cramped, either. It seemed pretty plain for the CEO of a major corporation, but it was more than enough for a family of four.

Sayu, who'd taken considerably more time to leave the car, joined me in staring at the house. She was clearly anxious.

Noticing this, Issa gently asked her, "Are you okay?"

Sayu gulped a few times before she was able to get anything out.

"Yeah..." she said, nodding weakly.

She didn't look okay in the slightest, but at this point, there was no turning back.

I gave her a firm pat on the shoulder.

"You'll be fine. Your brother and I are here with you," I told her, and at last, she managed a faint smile.

"I guess so. Thanks," she replied. She took a determined step forward.

Issa shuffled ahead and reached the entrance of the house before Sayu could get there. Then he put his key into the lock and opened the door with a *clank*.

Issa and Sayu stepped ahead into the house, while I stood holding the door. It felt wrong to go in without the owner's permission.

"Mom! We're home!" Issa called out in a loud voice.

From where I stood behind them, I saw Sayu instinctively hide behind her brother's back.

Soon, we could hear noisy footsteps coming from the back of the house. Then Sayu and Issa's mother appeared.

"Mom, I've brought Sayu ho—" Issa began, but without even taking the time to listen to him, their mother rushed down into the entryway where the shoes were kept, still in her house slippers.

The next instant, I heard a crisp smacking sound. Sayu's mother had slapped her daughter across the face. Both Issa and I were in shock. Then she began screaming at the top of her lungs, overcome with rage.

"Where the hell have you been?!" she yelled, grabbing hold of Sayu. "Everyone's been gossiping about us, and it's all your fault!"

I couldn't believe those were the first words out of her mouth.

Sayu seemed too frightened to say anything back.

It wasn't hard to imagine the woman tearing her daughter to shreds if we let things proceed like this. That was when Issa, just as astonished as I was, made a move. He seemed to have finally remembered why he was there.

Smoothly throwing himself between the two of them, he declared, "Cut it out, Mom! We have a guest!"

Shocked by this announcement, Sayu's mother finally noticed me. She looked perplexed.

She offered me a slight bow, then eyed me suspiciously.

"And who might he be?"

She looked at Issa as she spoke, making it clear who the question was for.

"This is Mr. Yoshida," Issa explained. "He took care of Sayu for a long time. I insisted that he come with us."

It surprised me to hear him lie about why I'd come along, but I soon realized he'd probably done it for my benefit. If he said it was his idea, she might be more inclined to hear me out than if she knew I'd invited myself.

After hearing Issa's answer, she fixed me with a heavy gaze and scoffed.

"So you *'took care of'* Sayu, did you?"

It wasn't hard to guess what she was implying. But I'd prepared myself for such accusations, and I was able to stay calm and bow.

"My name is Yoshida."

She glared at me for a few seconds, then sighed and nodded in my direction.

"Come on in," she said curtly and quickly withdrew into the living room.

Issa sighed, looking a little relieved.

"Please do come in, Mr. Yoshida," he said.

"Sorry to intrude..."

Now that I had permission, I finally stepped into the house and closed the door behind me.

Taking the lead, Issa removed his shoes and proceeded inside, as if inviting us to do the same. But Sayu was still standing by the front door, rooted to the spot.

“Are you okay?” I asked, and she moved her head up and down robotically, her eyes fixed on some point in front of her.

“Mm-hmm.”

She had an intense look in her eyes, but it was hard to tell if it was sadness or rage. This expression was new to me, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it for a moment.

But before long, I remembered something. I was here to encourage Sayu to move forward.

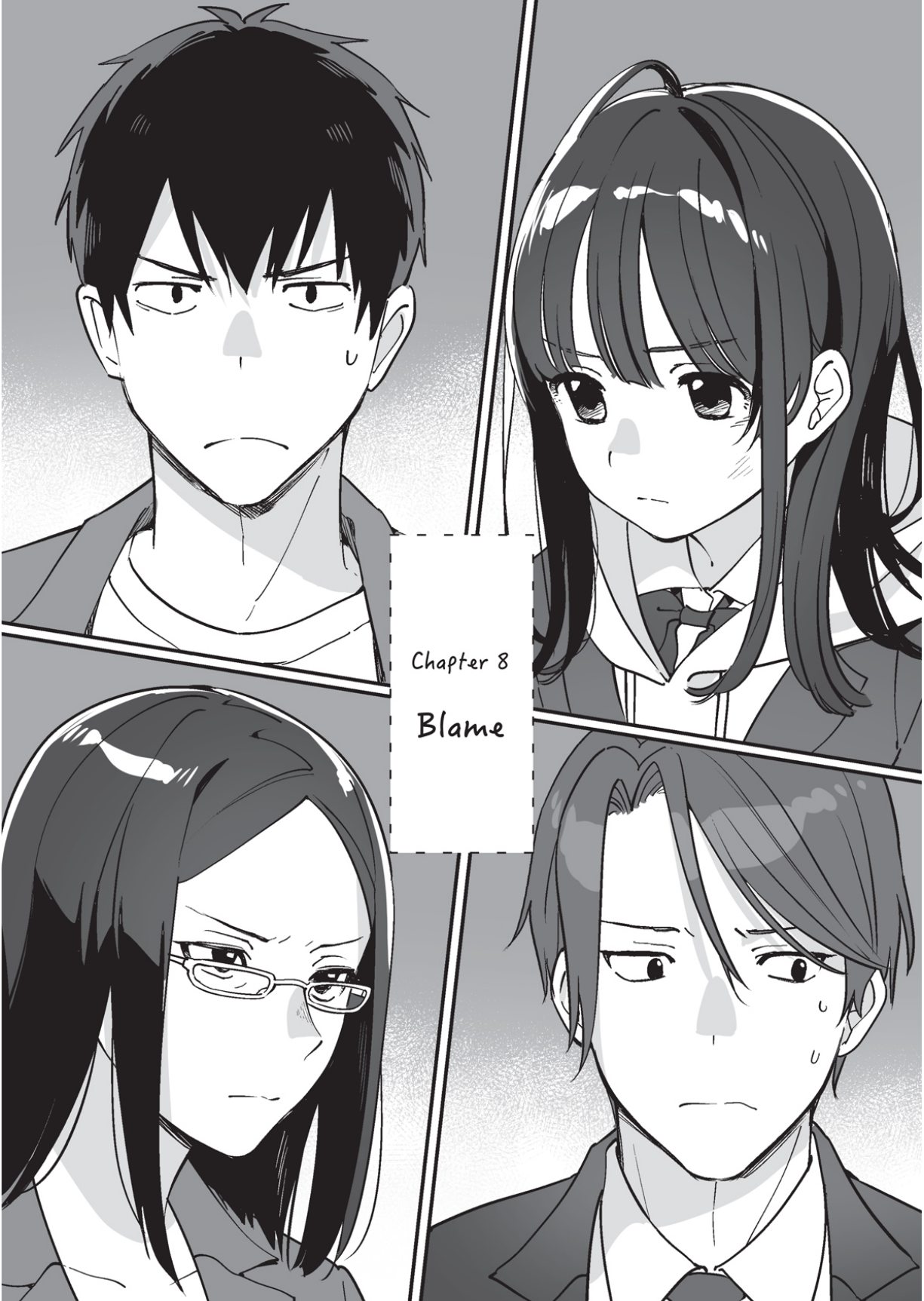
“Let’s go,” I said, gently rubbing her back.

She gasped in surprise, and her expression softened a little.

“Yeah.”

She flashed me a small, if awkward, smile and nodded.

Then she followed Issa, and the three of us nervously entered the living room.



## Chapter 8 Blame

I hung behind as the three of them sat down at the living room table. But soon Issa turned to me and pointed at the last empty spot.

“Please sit.”

“Thank you very much.”

I bowed and took a seat.

Sayu’s mother never once looked at Issa or me—she kept her piercing glare fixed on Sayu.

Not a word was spoken as Issa poured all four of us cups of water. The atmosphere was so tense, my mouth stayed glued shut.

It was Sayu’s mother who spoke first.

“So what were you hoping to accomplish?” she asked.

The scowl she was leveling at her daughter was not the kind of expression a parent directed at a child.

“You’ve made so much trouble for the family, refusing to come home for such a long time... Even before you left, you did nothing but cause problems,” Sayu’s mother spat. It was like she was venting all her pent-up frustration. “And now you’re causing trouble for strangers, too. What are you after?”

She gestured to me with her chin as she spoke.

Sayu, who’d been listening in silence up until then, started to say something. But her words seemed to stick in her throat.

“...understand.”

“What was that?”

“You won’t even try to understand.”

The clear note of anger in Sayu’s voice surprised me, and I cast a sidelong glance at her.

Her eyes, much like her voice, were quivering with rage.

Sayu's mother's eyebrows shot up. She appeared offended that Sayu had snapped at her instead of apologizing.

Issa sat beside his mother, a look of dread on his face. But he held his tongue and kept an eye on the both of them.

"How could I?" said their mother. "It's not like you ever tell me."

I got the feeling that Sayu was growing even angrier beside me. I didn't need to see her expression—the tension in the air was palpable.

"Do you remember what you said to me the day I left, Mom?" Sayu asked, her voice shaking.

Her mother was silent for a few seconds, like she was thinking it over. But it wasn't long before she gave up and raised her head.

"...I'm not sure. I don't remember."

I was aghast. Issa, seated opposite me, exhaled through his nose. He clearly wished she hadn't said that.

We had heard the story only from Sayu, but even Issa and I remembered what her mother had said to her.

Those words had hurt Sayu so deeply that she ran away from home. And yet, the very person who said them had forgotten all about it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Sayu trembling.

I looked over at her without moving my head...and saw tears in her eyes. I couldn't tell if they were from anger or sadness.

"See, I knew it... You don't care about me at all, Mom. You never even try to understand."

"You've only been home for five seconds, and you're already criticizing me. I bet you ran away just to spite us and forget about your problems, didn't you?"

"No!" Sayu shouted, leaping up from her seat.

The sudden emotional outburst made her mother jump. She looked briefly intimidated, but soon her eyebrows shot up again, and she fixed Sayu with another glare.

"I...I just wanted to get away from you, Mom!" Sayu shouted.

Her blunt words shook me to the core. The old Sayu had never spoken her mind so clearly. She was obviously furious.

Sayu's anger didn't come from a desire to beat down her opponent, either. She just wanted to be understood. She'd stopped trying to justify herself.



She simply laid bare her weaknesses and let her feelings pour out.

“You never tried to understand how I felt! You—my own mother—thought I killed...my only friend in the whole world...”

Her initial intensity gradually faded, and her voice grew quiet. She was crying.

Her mother gasped. Maybe she’d finally remembered. But soon, a stern scowl was back on her face.

“What did you think running away was going to accomplish? You’re a child. Children can’t do anything by themselves.”

“That’s...true, but...” Sayu stumbled over her words.

Looking at her, I sensed an overwhelming hopelessness. What else could she have done besides run away? And...it was precisely her mother’s failure to understand this that had pushed Sayu into leaving.

The two of them were never going to see eye to eye.

Seeing her daughter’s hesitation as a chance to gain the upper hand, Sayu’s mother grew more heated in her accusations.

“And *what* were you thinking, staying with some man from who knows where? You’ve even dragged him all the way here! Are you just trying to shame me?”

“Mr. Yoshida came along for *me*.”

“For you? He’s just sticking his nose into other people’s business.”

“Don’t be disrespectful, Mom.”

“Shut up, Issa.”

Sayu’s mother was too enraged to listen to her son’s interruptions.

“He *took care of* you, did he? Luring someone else’s little girl into your house sounds like a *crime* to me.”

“Mom, listen—”

“I thought I told you to shut up!”

Their mother’s fury was now aimed at me, and she wasn’t about to let Issa stop her. She turned and glared in my direction.

This, however, was something I’d prepared for. Her reaction was only natural.

I sat up straight and looked their mother in the eye.

“You’re right. I know that what I did—letting Sayu stay with me—is a crime.”

“Just because you’re aware doesn’t make it right. You’re still a criminal. Why are you in my house?”

“That’s because Sayu—”

Just as I started to explain, I was interrupted by a loud *thud* as Sayu slammed the table beside me. This gave me such a shock that I forgot what I was about to say. Sayu’s hands were shaking.

“Every time. Every single time...,” she began, her voice a low growl that seemed to come from the back of her throat.

“Every single time, you disrespect the people I care about!” Sayu shouted, exploding with anger. “You ignore what they say, and you vilify them!”

It was the first time I’d seen Sayu so furious, and all three of us were taken aback.

“I hate that about you!!!” Sayu cried at the top of her lungs. Her voice shook the air.

With her mother still unable to speak, Sayu continued, her quiet voice full of fury.

“Mr. Yoshida...looked after me like we were family. He’s not like you... He sees me as a human being.”

I could see the rage spreading over their mother’s face at Sayu’s words.

“What the hell are you talking about...? You have no idea how much I’ve suffered!” Sayu’s mother pounded the table as she spoke. “You don’t even have a clue how much I lost because of you...!”

Issa had told me about their mother’s situation, and I couldn’t help but sympathize with the sorrow in her words.

It seemed like Sayu and her mother’s relationship was beyond saving, and that saddened me.

Her next declaration, however, stopped my thoughts in their tracks.

“I never...should’ve had you.”

With that, the room fell deathly silent.

I could sense that all of us were shocked. And for the first time, Issa looked unmistakably angry. Beside me, Sayu inhaled sharply. And I...

I grabbed the cup of water in front of me...and dumped it over Sayu’s mother’s head.

...Or at least, that was the vision that played out in my head. The moment the urge came over me, my self-control kicked in and put a stop to it. That wasn't the right move. If I did something like that, we'd never be able to talk things out calmly.

I stood up, took the cup I'd grabbed a moment earlier, and brought it to my lips. I started gulping the liquid, and as it ran down my throat, I could feel it slowly cooling both my body and my thoughts, helping me regain a sense of calm.

I could feel everyone's eyes on me.

I slammed the cup down on the table with an emphatic *clunk!*

"...That's quite enough."

## Chapter 9 Parents

Strange feelings swirled in my heart.

I'd come close to throwing water over Sayu's mother's head but had somehow managed to quell the impulse... I felt like I had two conflicting emotions inside me.

Rage quietly boiled in the pit of my stomach. At the same time, an overpowering sense of calm seemed to be overriding it, telling me to stay cool and forming a kind of coating over all my other emotions.

I was definitely angry, but I was also composed.

Still experiencing this strange feeling, I slowly put my thoughts into words.

"Just as a parent can't choose their child, a child can't choose their parents."

My voice was low and a little shaky. I couldn't tell if it was from my anger or my effort to suppress it.

We don't come into this world by choice. Mothers and fathers get together, and children are born, regardless of how those children feel about it.

Should a child shoulder the responsibility for their own birth?

I didn't think so.

The time to take responsibility for one's life was adulthood. Children were still immature, both physically and psychologically. It seemed to me they were in no place to bear that burden on their own.

No matter how unloved they were or how unfortunate their circumstances...children still had to survive. And yet, they didn't have the means to do it alone.

Regardless, Sayu had struggled on and on...and been hurt time and time again.

“No matter what, you’re the...only parent Sayu has,” I said. My voice came out strained as I suppressed my anger. Or was it sadness? “Children... don’t know how to take care of themselves without their parents’ protection.”

I wasn’t confident that I was getting across what I wanted to say. My rage and sadness had left me unable to think straight, and yet words continued to pour out of my mouth.

Sayu’s mother simply sat there and listened to me, her eyes wide.

“If you’re going to put her down like that...then I’d prefer to have her instead. I...I’d like to take care of her.”

Her mother frowned disapprovingly, and Sayu gasped.

Those were my true feelings, and I found myself unable to lie.

“But...” I sighed. My throat was burning as I shook my head. “But I can’t... I can’t ask for something so unreasonable.”

That much was clear. I could never be Sayu’s father.

“She’s not my responsibility... I don’t have the right to take her on.”

It was her real family’s job to take responsibility for her and help her when she had a problem. And that responsibility brought obligations with it... It wasn’t something to be taken lightly.

I didn’t have any of that. When push came to shove, I couldn’t protect a child with love alone.

I slowly pulled back my chair.

I moved to where Sayu’s mother would be able to see me, then got down on my knees.

“It has to be you. No one else has the right to take care of her! So I’m begging you...please...!”

I lowered my head. And then...I pressed my forehead to the floor.

I was begging her from the depths of my soul.

“Please...”

My body was trembling, and my breath burned hot.

“Please look after her...until she’s old enough to make it on her own.”

I was still on the floor as I said this. Even with my head bowed, I could tell that the other three were losing their composure.

“Mr. Yoshida, you don’t have to...”

“You’re not even family. So why...?”

I heard Sayu and then her mother address me. They both sounded perplexed.

“Please! I’m begging you!” I cried once more, my head still lowered.

Almost immediately, I heard the clatter of someone else getting up from their chair.

“I’m begging you, too, Mom...!”

“Issa...?!”

Issa was now on the ground with me, in front of his mother. Sayu was obviously shaken by what was happening.

I slowly looked up at her mother to find her face was as white as a sheet.

“Wh-what...? What’s happening...?” she mumbled incoherently.

Her breathing grew shallower, and then she, too, got up from her seat. Her chair scraped across the floor.

“Get out... Get *out*!” she screamed. Her confusion was sending her over the edge.

Issa got up right away, his face full of dread again.

“It’s all right. It’s all right,” he repeated, rubbing his mother’s back and sitting her down again.

“What...? What’s going on...?” she continued to mumble quietly to herself.

Issa quickly walked over to me.

“I apologize, but do you mind heading out for a moment?” he whispered.

I nodded firmly and stood up.

“Can you go with him, Sayu?” he added.

“S-sure...”

Keeping one eye on her mother, Sayu did as her brother said and left the living room.

I followed suit, and Issa came to the door and shut it behind him. Then he looked at Sayu and me in turn.

“Leave the rest of this to me. You two should go outside and get some air.”

He offered us a reassuring smile and stepped back into the living room.

A few seconds later, I heard the faint sounds of Issa and his mother talking from the other side of the door. If I'd stayed, I probably could have made out what they were saying. But I didn't think that was what Issa wanted.

"...Let's do what your brother suggested."

"Y-yeah."

I quickly slipped on my shoes in the entryway and exited the house. A moment later, Sayu joined me.

The air outside was cool, and before I started thinking about anything else, I sucked in a deep breath. After the crisp air had passed through my throat, I felt a little more at ease. I could feel the emotion pent up inside me gradually subside.

"....."

Once the tension left my body, I started shaking. It didn't take long for me to realize it wasn't anger I was feeling.

That's when my vision blurred.

Before I knew it, I was squatting down on the ground.

"Mr. Yoshida...?" Sayu called out from behind me.

She ran over, crouched by my side, and took a look at my face. I immediately tried to turn away, but...she must have seen me.

I heard her gasp in shock.

"M-Mr. Yoshida, why are you...?" she began, placing a hand on my hunched back. "Why are you crying...?"

She sounded like she didn't know what to do.

I said nothing and furiously wiped my tears away with my sleeve. I'd spent so long trying not to cry in front of her. But this time, there was no fighting it.

Tears poured down my face.

The feeling in me now was crystal clear—I was overcome with sadness.

"Y-you told me about..." Holding back my sobs, I tried to put the heat rising up inside me into words. "You told me about how your mother... treated you, so I should have known what to expect..."

Sayu kept her gaze fixed on the side of my face.

All the while, tears kept streaming down my cheeks. They wouldn't stop.

"But...actually hearing her say that she never should have had you was... so much more painful than I thought."

Those words had been directed at Sayu, not at me. And yet, I could imagine vividly how it would feel to hear them.

I knew how I'd feel if one of my parents had told me as a child—completely seriously—that they wished I'd never been born. The thought alone made me feel sick and desperately miserable at the same time.

“I can't stand...that she'd say something like that...”

“I-it's all right, Mr. Yoshida.”

“It's *not* all right!”

I raised my voice without thinking and startled Sayu.

I turned toward her, knowing my face was probably a mess.

“Get angry... Talk back..... Give her what she deserves...!” I said.

Sayu's eyes widened with surprise, then slowly filled with tears.

And yet, she didn't cry.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

There was a big grin on Sayu's face. I had no idea how she could smile at a time like this, but her expression didn't falter as she continued.

“I was going to get angry, too... But you beat me to it.” Then, in a gentler voice, she added, “Thanks, Mr. Yoshida...”

Unable to reply, I kept wiping at my endless tears with my shirtsleeve. Sayu rubbed my back as I bawled like a baby just outside the front door.

At first, I was ashamed that Sayu was seeing me like this, pathetically sobbing my eyes out. But I gradually stopped caring.

I'd always been pathetic.

Once I realized this, it seemed ridiculous to try to play it cool. And so, for the first time in years, I cried until I had no tears left.



## Chapter 10 The Ogiwara Family

Maybe it was only a few minutes; maybe it was almost an hour.

Unaware of how much time was passing, I simply sat against the stone wall in front of the door, with Sayu next to me, and cried until I was totally exhausted.

The sky had cleared since we visited her old high school. As I stared blankly up at it, I noticed that we had a good view of the stars. They were even brighter and more brilliant than the ones Sayu had shown me at that park up on the hill.

“The stars are so beautiful...it’s almost obnoxious,” I whispered to Sayu, recalling what she’d said about Hokkaido’s gorgeous night sky.

“Told you so,” she replied. I could see her shoulders shaking—she must be laughing.

Since I’d only just stopped crying, my vision was still blurry. Because of that—no, thanks to that, the stars overhead were like a dazzling kaleidoscope.

I spent a few moments staring at them, captivated, before Sayu hesitantly broke the silence.

“Hey, Mr. Yoshida.”

“Yeah?”

“When you bowed your head to my mother...it felt like all my mistakes had been forgiven.”

“Huh?”

I looked at Sayu, but her eyes were fixed on the starry sky above us. The stars’ light reflected in her moist eyes, making them sparkle.

“It made me realize that...even though I’ve messed up in all sorts of ways...it wasn’t for nothing,” she said, placing one of her hands on top of

mine. The chilly evening air had left my skin icy cold, and her touch felt incredibly warm.

Sayu abruptly turned my way, a relaxed smile on her face.

“...I’m all right now.”

My breath caught in my throat.

Her words and expression implied a resilience that I’d never seen from her before. Within her smile, I sensed a calm, unwavering determination.

“I know I’ll be able to make it on my own...even when you’re gone.” She paused. I felt her grip tighten around my hand. “So...there’s no need to worry about me, okay?”

Her fingers trembled slightly as she spoke, but I decided not to point that out.

No matter how prepared or brave you felt, taking the first step was always a frightening prospect. Even I knew that.

“I know,” I said succinctly, squeezing her hand in return. “You’ve got this.”

I left it at that and looked back up at the stars.

As we sat there, hand in hand, staring at the sky, a certain memory floated up in my mind. It was something Asami had said and Sayu had told me.

*“From the perspective of the stars, each of us is insignificant, but we all have histories and futures of our own.”*

When I’d first heard this, I hadn’t associated it with my own life. But now I saw things differently.

A decent amount of time had passed since Sayu and I first met. But what did that look like from a stranger’s perspective? From the world’s perspective? From the universe’s perspective?

The farther you zoomed out, the more insignificant our existence must have seemed. And yet, by some twist of fate, Sayu’s path had crossed with mine...and a little story was born.

Perhaps one day I would look back on this time in my life. By then... would Sayu have grown into a proper adult?



My sense of time grew hazy as I looked up at the night sky, pondering all the possibilities.

The only thing I could feel was the warmth from Sayu's hand as I gazed with childlike wonder at the stars.



“What’s going on already...?”

I gently rubbed my mother's back as she sat hunched over with her head in her hands.

“It’s all right, Mom... Relax.”

Her body was shaking. It was hard to believe that this was the same woman who'd been screaming her head off just a few minutes earlier—she looked incredibly small now.

She hadn't always been like this. I'd witnessed my mother's smile fade with my own eyes. Much like with Sayu, it had been a gradual process.

Mom always smiled cheerfully around my father. She was so pretty that I could see it even as a child.

I remembered noticing how much Sayu resembled our mother as she grew.

They both should have kept those beautiful smiles, but my father managed to mess it all up.

How many times had I wished that the three of us could have just forgotten about him and carried on enjoying our lives? But I could never bring myself to say it.

Once I was old enough to understand our family's situation, I began to comprehend the painful extent to which my mother loved my father.

Why do people fall in love with those who don't love them back? Unrequited love only leads to suffering.

I fixed my eyes on my mother's hunched and trembling back as I reflected on the past.

“Why would a *stranger*—someone who doesn't know anything—speak to me like *that*...?” she murmured feebly.

“Mom...”

I was at a loss for what to say to her.

Mr. Yoshida was always going to be on Sayu's side. He may have heard what happened to Sayu and my mother, but that didn't mean he had a realistic grasp of all the conflict and pain that came with it.

What he had said to my mother was right. That was why I had joined him on the floor. Despite that, I still had just as much sympathy for my mother.

"I know..." Mom whispered.

"What?"

"I know...it's true..." Her voice trembled as she squeezed out the words. "Now that *he's* gone, I'm the only parent she's got... Even I know that..."

I felt a pain in my chest. My mother had just acknowledged reality.

She'd known it was true all along—she simply hadn't wanted to accept it. I'd known it, too. Sayu...must have as well.

"But...then..." My mother began trembling once more, her sobs echoing vainly through the room. "...What was I supposed to do...?"

I tried as hard as I could to hold back my tears.

There was nothing she could have done. Mom still had a gaping wound in her heart—just like Sayu. She didn't know how to live with that pain while taking care of the child who sat at the root of it.

It really was...a hopeless situation.

"Mom..."

I continued to gently rub her back, desperately trying to choose the right words.

"...Take it one step at a time, no more... You just have to stay positive."

"....."

"Since meeting that man—Mr. Yoshida—Sayu's started to feel a little more positive about her future, too."

Someone had to tell her—tell her that this was wrong, that we'd messed up somewhere. Yes, someone had to tell her, but...

Despite being the only one who could, I found myself unable to say it. I wasn't brave enough to poke at our family's exposed wounds.

Mr. Yoshida had been the one to tell Sayu, after they met by chance. And then she'd reflected on the path she'd taken, even though it was hard to face.

At some point, everyone had to look back on the life they'd led. You had to grit your teeth and make peace with your mistakes. There was no avoiding it.

For our family, that time was now.

“Mom, you—no, *we*—need to look ahead and think...about the future. It’s fine if you can only take baby steps.”

“.....Ungh...”

My mother let out a sob. She was shaking again, and I could hear sniffing coming from her small, hunched form.

“Mom...”

“Issa... I...”

“Don’t worry. It’ll be fine. You’ve got me...”

She began to sob loudly, her voice strained. I simply carried on slowly rubbing her back.

With every tear that rolled down her face, it felt like she released more of the painful feelings that had been weighing her down.

A little while later, she finally stopped crying and whispered, “I’ll take care of her...until she graduates high school.”

“What?”

“...Sayu. After that, I’ll let her do whatever she wants.”

My mother finally looked at me. Her lips formed an awkward smile.

“I’m sure I’ll end up causing even more trouble for you, Issa.”

“Mom... I assure you, I’m fine. It’s no trouble. After all”—I continued to fight back tears as I spoke—“I’m...your son.”

Her eyes went wide, filling with tears.

“...Yes, you’re right.”

My mother said she wanted some time alone, so I went out into the hallway. I exhaled and felt all the tension leave my body. I must’ve been more stressed-out than I’d thought.

Somehow, it had all worked out. Mom had promised to take care of Sayu until she graduated high school.

I sighed heavily and thought back on the events of a little earlier.

*“It has to be you. No one else has the right to take care of her! So I’m begging you...please...!”*

*“Please look after her...until she’s old enough to make it on her own.”*

Mr. Yoshida had gotten down on his hands and knees and begged my mother to take responsibility for Sayu.

He never ceased to amaze me.

He'd said it himself: Sayu wasn't his responsibility. He had no right to raise her. Those were his own words.

And he was correct. He wasn't obliged to take care of her, and it wasn't his responsibility to do so. He could have taken advantage of her, then tossed her to the curb whenever he wanted.

In truth, I suspected that Sayu had come across more than a few men who had done just that.

Why, then, was Mr. Yoshida so different? He'd only just met Sayu. Why did he care about her so deeply? Why was he so concerned about her future?

His actions filled me with doubt and self-loathing.

On paper, I was much closer to Sayu than he was, and yet I hadn't been able to do anything to help her.

Instead, I'd pretended to have my hands full managing my father's company and turned a blind eye to what was going on. Without realizing it, I'd used being busy with work as an excuse for maintaining the status quo.

As a result, there was no one Sayu could ask for help, and she'd had no choice but to run away.

The truth was, I should have forced Sayu to come home as soon as I realized she'd spent all the money I'd given her. Even then, I'd told myself I was prioritizing Sayu's feelings, but I was really just prioritizing my job.

I was afraid that applying pressure to the cracks in our family would shatter it, so I'd chosen to turn a blind eye to everything.

Inside, I'd felt utterly powerless. And then I'd imposed that powerlessness on Sayu.

I'd figured that someday she'd realize on her own that wandering aimlessly wasn't going to change anything. I'd naively convinced myself that the easy option—just letting her be—was the right thing to do.

What would have happened to Sayu if she hadn't met Mr. Yoshida? The thought alone made me shudder. What if she'd suddenly gotten involved in something even more dangerous? ...If she'd started stealing or doing drugs, the whole situation would have been a disaster.

"What on earth was I thinking...?"

Thanks to Mr. Yoshida, Sayu had gotten back on her feet. Now she could continue to live her life. At the same time, I was fed up with myself for being content to simply thank the other man.

Soon, he would leave and go back to his old way of life. Sayu would be left without a father, having to deal with our mother's unstable mental state, and I'd be the only one who could consistently protect her.

"This time... This time, I..."

I clenched my fist, determined.

Sayu and our mother were both finally ready to move forward—albeit little by little.

I prayed I'd be able to watch over them as they each set off on their respective journeys.



We'd been staring up at the stars for some time when we heard the click of the front door opening, and Issa stepped outside.

Sayu and I both gazed up at him from where we sat, totally exhausted, against the stone wall. We both looked a little dazed.

Issa blinked a few times in astonishment before cracking a large grin.

"You two seem friendly," he said teasingly. Just then, I realized what he was looking at.

Sayu and I were still holding hands. Flustered, I let go. Seeing my reaction, Issa chuckled again.

He then turned to Sayu and said gently, "We've finished talking."

"...H-how'd it go?" she asked, looking tense. Issa nodded twice before continuing.

"First off, you have to stay here until you finish high school," he said, leaning in and patting her softly on the head. "As long as you don't cause any problems, Mom will stop interfering with your life and making unreasonable demands."

For a moment, Sayu's eyes opened wide in surprise. But her expression soon turned sour, and she frowned and tilted her head to one side.

"But...how do you know...?"

"She promised me, of course. Who knows if she'll keep her word. But..." Issa paused and glanced my way, a gentle smile on his face. "...It seems



like what Mr. Yoshida said resonated with her somehow.”

Issa’s hand was still resting on Sayu’s head, and he tousled her hair once more. It was a total mess now.

“Besides, you’ve matured a bit since you left,” he continued. “Maybe it’s time we started thinking of a way for you and Mom to get along. And of course...I’ll be around to help.”

“...Yeah. I guess you’re right,” Sayu agreed meekly. “I doubt it’ll happen immediately...but we can at least try to make things better.”

A moment later, she added, “I mean, I haven’t even tried in ages...”

Sayu’s conversation with her mother had ended on a less than amicable note, partly because I’d gotten so riled up. That said, now that Sayu had finally spoken with her, I thought she was probably in a better place mentally. It had been a big step for her, after all.

Just as Issa said, Sayu had probably matured during her months away from home. Even adults find it hard to reconcile with someone whose values clash with their own. It’s hard work, and it’s often easier to confront them and leave it at that. The fact that Sayu was being positive and trying was a wonderful sign of change.

Casting a sidelong glance at her, I asked Issa something that had just occurred to me.

“You said she’d stay here until she’s done with high school, but what will she do after that?”

Issa nodded as if he’d been anticipating this question.

“That’s up to Sayu to decide. If she wants to stay at home, she can. But if she wants to move out, I can provide her with plenty of assistance.” Issa paused and looked at Sayu. “Once you graduate high school, it’ll be time to find your own path to adulthood. You can do whatever you want after that.”

Issa stroked Sayu’s head. I could see a deep, familial affection in the way he gazed at her.

“If money is an obstacle, then I’ll help you out until you’re able to stand on your own two feet. I can do that, at least.”

Issa really was a great older brother. Had he been at home the whole time, keeping an eye on Sayu’s well-being, I suspected her mental health might have suffered a little less.

But he hadn’t. That was why Sayu had set off on her journey.

“Anyway... It’s been quite a day. But I think it’s safe to say that the worst is now behind us,” Issa said, letting out a deep breath.

After that, he looked me straight in the eye and dropped his head in a deep bow.

“This is all thanks to you, Mr. Yoshida.”

“What? But I didn’t...” I panicked, waving my hand dismissively.

All I’d done was speak my mind. I’d let my emotions get the better of me, without even considering where it might lead.

“I’m an adult. I should’ve known better than to act that way,” I admitted, reflecting on what I’d said and done.

Issa slowly shook his head.

“That’s not true. When you got down on your hands and knees, it forced our mother to pull herself together.”

A self-deprecating smile came to his face.

“I actually feel guilty,” he said.

“Guilty?” I asked.

“Yes... I’m her brother, and I’ve never once bowed and begged our mother to take better care of my sister.”

His eyes narrowed, and he stared off into the distance before turning back to look at me.

“But you did it like it was nothing, and your feelings were genuine.” He shrugged. “Nothing I do could ever compare...and I mean that.”

I had no idea how to respond. A little embarrassed, I shifted my gaze toward Sayu, and our eyes met.

“Thank you so much,” she said, grinning.

“...N-no problem.”

Her straightforward expression of thanks warmed my heart.

Perhaps what I’d done hadn’t been pointless after all. I was glad I’d come with her to Hokkaido.

“It’s gotten late, so please stay at our place tonight. The guest room is yours,” Issa said before briskly making his way back to the front door. “It might only be fall, but the nights get pretty chilly here. Come inside before you catch a cold.”

Issa opened the door and waited for us.

After a moment’s hesitation, I found the courage to ask him another question.

“Um...would you mind if...I took some time to speak with Sayu’s mother again?”

Issa’s expression turned serious as he thought this over. His reluctance was understandable. My actions earlier had clearly knocked her off-balance.

If I spoke to her now, there was a chance I might upset her all over again. And after Issa had gone to considerable trouble to calm her down.

But...

I’d claimed to be an adult, and yet I’d managed only to speak my mind like a child. I hadn’t taken responsibility for what I’d done, and Sayu’s mother hadn’t forgiven me, either.

Where blame is due, blame must be accepted. And when asked to take responsibility for our actions, we are obligated to do so.

I was an adult. It was my duty to talk things through like one.

Issa took a moment, then nodded slowly.

“Fine. As long as you don’t mind my joining you.”

“Of course not. Thank you,” I replied immediately. Issa sighed in relief and gestured again for us to go back inside.

“Wh-what about me...?” Sayu asked nervously as she took her shoes off in the entryway.

“Your being there might complicate things, Sayu. Do you mind waiting for a little while?” I asked.

“O-okay.”

Sayu looked relieved for a moment before intentionally reverting to a straight face, as if hiding her feelings.

Breathing in some fresh air may have calmed her down, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t nervous about facing her mother again so soon.

It seemed like a strange thing to try to hide. But Sayu was such a conscientious person, she was probably just trying not to show how vulnerable she was.

“Are you ready, then, Mr. Yoshida...?”

“Yes.”

I left Sayu by the door and followed Issa into the living room.

Once there, I locked eyes with Sayu’s mother. She was still sitting in the same chair as the last time I’d seen her.

She quickly looked away, turning to Issa in search of an explanation.

“What?” she asked.

“Mr. Yoshida wants to talk to you again, Mom.”

When she heard this, she turned back toward me. Then she narrowed her eyes, scowled, and repeated her question.

“What?” It was the same word that she’d said to Issa, but it sounded much more scathing when directed at me. “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“I want to sincerely apologize for what happened earlier. I lost control and didn’t think about what I was saying...”

“Excuse me? You’ve been rude enough as it is, coming into my home like this. It’s a little late to try to act polite now, don’t you think?”

Sayu’s mother seemed completely unapproachable. She dismissed whatever I had to say with a wave of her hand, as if she was swatting a fly.

After glaring at me for a moment, she sighed.

“You...didn’t put your hands on her, did you?”

“I swear to you I did not,” I answered immediately.

Sayu’s mother held her tongue for a few seconds. Her expression was hard to describe.

When she eventually spoke, her voice came out shaky, and she sounded a little baffled.

“Then why...would you do so much for her?”

I got the feeling this question was far more emotionally charged for Sayu’s mother than I knew.

I recalled Issa asking me much the same thing once before. Back then, I’d admitted that the real reason I let her stay with me might have been because she was cute.

There was no way I could say that to Sayu’s mother, though. Honesty wasn’t always the best policy.

And just then...a different answer sprang naturally into my mind. I quickly realized that this answer, too, was true.

I spoke slowly.

“I just...happened to meet her on the right day at the right time... That’s all there is to it.”

I could hear Issa gasp beside me. I saw emotion gather in his mother’s eyes. After staring at me for a few seconds, she breathed a deep sigh.

“...Right,” she said.

It was the kind of curt response I’d come to expect from her, but she seemed a little less hostile than before. Or was that my imagination?

“Um, about Sayu’s—”

“About Sayu’s future,” she said, interrupting me. “She and I will have a chat and think things through. So I’d like you...” She paused, and her next words were even calmer. “I’d like you to please go back to Tokyo tomorrow.”

“...Okay. I’ll do that,” I answered, bowing deeply.

Sensing that his mother was finished with the conversation, Issa signaled me to get up.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

“All right.”

I let Issa guide me out of the living room.

I certainly hadn’t told her everything I’d wanted to...but there was no point in dragging out the conversation when Sayu’s mother didn’t wish to continue it.

Plus...I thought back to something she’d just said.

*“She and I.”*

Sayu’s mother didn’t intend to decide her daughter’s future for her—they were going to talk things through and come to a conclusion *together*.

This must have been a big compromise for her, and perhaps it showed that she was changing.

I got the feeling that, somehow, Sayu and her mother would be able to figure things out and make their way forward.

“Oh, Mr. Yoshida...”

“Sayu?”

I found Sayu standing in the hallway just outside the living room. I tilted my head, unsure why she looked so anxious. She stared back at me, misty-eyed.

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

With that, she went into the living room.

As Issa watched her go, concern flashed briefly across his face. But soon, he turned toward me and grinned.

“I’ll take you to your room,” he said.

“Um, what about Sayu...?”

“I’m sure the two of them have a lot to discuss...”

Issa sounded calm, so I said no more and followed him up the stairs to the second floor.



I entered the living room as Mr. Yoshida and my brother left.

I could tell my heart was racing, and my breathing was a little shallow.

My mother, sitting in her chair with her head down, slowly looked up at me.

“What is it now...?” she asked, looking tired.

To be honest, the events of the day had taken their toll on me as well. I didn’t feel like talking. I just wanted to go to sleep.

But if I did that, I felt I’d lose the opportunity to say certain things I could only say now. This was my one chance.

*“There are people you can only meet now and things you won’t get another chance to do.”*

I thought back on Miss Yuzuha’s words.

I still didn’t like my mother, but there were some things that needed to be said.

I lightly clapped the hem of my skirt to flatten it out. Then I bent down and sat on my knees on the floor. I straightened my back, then slowly lowered my head.

“I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused you,” I said.

I could hear my mother suck in her breath. She sounded surprised.

I lifted my head and looked her straight in the eye.

“To tell you the truth...you did a lot that hurt me over the years. That’s why...I ran away.”

I could feel my voice trembling as I spoke. But all the while, my heart was screaming, “Be brave! You have to tell her!”

If we both blamed each other without reflecting on our actions, we would be opposed for the rest of our lives.

“But as a result, I caused problems for you, for Issa...and for other people, too. That’s undeniable. So...”

We needed to acknowledge our mistakes and slowly talk things out.

“So I’m sorry,” I said. I made sure not to break eye contact as I spoke.

My mother appeared shocked and a little taken aback. Then she shook her head.

“I’m...not going to apologize. I won’t,” she said before looking down at the floor.

In her eyes, I saw a bottomless well of sadness.

“I just...I just don’t know...where I went wrong.”

These words were painful for me, too. They must bear the weight of my mother’s past—a past I didn’t know.

I could more or less guess why my mother held a particular animosity toward me and me alone. My existence must have been the reason my father wasn’t around anymore. I suspected the two things were somehow inextricably linked. Neither my mother nor my brother had told me directly, but even I was able to piece together the clues.

As I knelt there, unable to reply, my mother whispered something.

“...But when that man said those things, I realized he was right.”

The “man” she was talking about had to be Mr. Yoshida. I stayed silent and waited for her to elaborate.

My mother’s eyes darted around the floor, as if she was searching for the right words. At last, she slowly looked up at me. She sounded a bit unsure as she spoke.

“I’m...the only parent you have.”

I’d never heard her sound so gentle.

My eyes immediately began to well with tears. All I could do was nod and agree.

“.....Yeah...!”

When she saw my reaction, she continued brusquely, an indiscernible look on her face.

“Do your best here until you graduate high school. I’m sure you’ll have to repeat the year.”

“...Yeah.”

“After that...you’re free to do as you please.”

“.....Thanks.”

With that simple exchange, our conversation was over.

Feeling like I wouldn't be able to express myself any better than I already had, I got up and slowly left the room.

“...Haaah.”

Once outside, I exhaled, leaned against the wall of the hallway, and slumped down onto the floor. I thought I'd used up all my tears with Mr. Yoshida earlier, but now they were pouring down my face all over again.

My anxiety had completely vanished.

I'd done what I'd set out to do.

Even I knew there were a million reasons for my tears.

And yet, more than anything else...

...I was crying because I was happy.

It had been brief, but for the first time in my life, I'd had a calm conversation with my mother without either of us acting out.

I was surprised by how happy that made me.

For a few minutes, I just sat there in the hallway, crying without making a sound.



## Chapter 11 Last Night

They let me use the guest room, a pair of pajamas...and even the bath.

I may have had Issa's permission, but it still felt exceedingly generous, considering I'd forced myself into their home...

Unable to relax, I sat cross-legged on the futon laid out for me in the guest room and let my thoughts wander.

As I sat there in a daze, I started to crave a cigarette. I'd just have to endure.

...Things had calmed down enough for me to think about superfluous things like smoking, at least.

I had also begun to feel, as Issa said earlier, that the worst was now behind us. It looked like Sayu would be able to live here until she finished high school. There might be some issues, but Issa would be there to help.

That thought comforted me.

"...So that's it," I murmured. I nodded to myself over and over.

My role in her life...had finally come to an end. Despite the relief that brought me, a loneliness came with it that I couldn't completely ignore.

The following day, I would return to Tokyo and never see Sayu again.

"...Things are just going back to how they were before," I whispered.

Sighing, I crawled into the futon. I'd better just go to sleep and not overthink things. My mind was still sharp, but I could tell my body was exhausted from the long trip.

I closed my eyes. The futon smelled like someone else's home. While I found it a little unnerving, I did my best to take slow, even breaths.

But the more I tried to fall asleep, the clearer my thoughts became. It just wasn't working. I tossed and turned, irritated by the inexplicably loud ticking of the wall clock.

This went on and on, until I heard a soft *click* from across the room. The sound had come from the guest room door.

It was obvious that someone was trying to silently sneak into the room. This wasn't my home, however, so I didn't feel like I could just sit up and see who it was... Instead, I decided to pretend I was asleep.

Keeping my eyes closed, I focused on the presence now in the room with me. They slowly crept over from the door, came up to my futon...and squirmed their way inside.

There was only one person who would do that.

"What're you doing, Sayu?" I asked, rolling over to face her.

Sayu, now underneath the sheets beside me, simply laughed.

"Eh-heh-heh."

Her face was closer than I'd expected. It made my heart race for a moment, but I feigned calm. She cuddled close to me, a broad grin on her face.

"Today's our last day...so I thought we should sleep together."

"You said the same thing back at my place."

"Don't be so picky. That was the last time, but this is the *last* last time. Got it?"

I felt my chest ache, but I tried my best not to let the pain show.

"Well...all right," I answered brusquely, scooting over to give her room to sleep.

The futon I'd been given was meant for one, so it was quite cramped with two people inside.

"Turn over, Mr. Yoshida."

"Huh? Oh..."

I didn't know what Sayu was after, but I followed her orders and rolled over to face away from her.

A few seconds later, she pressed herself against my back and wrapped her arms tightly around me.

"H-hey, c'mon. What're you doing...?"

"It's no big deal. And besides, this is my last chance."

"Do you think you can get away with anything just because it's our last night together?"

"Why? Are you getting horny?"

"Shut up."

I easily brushed off her teasing, but to tell the truth, the feeling of Sayu's warm, soft body pressed against my back was extremely vivid.

That said, I wasn't exactly turned-on. My heart began to race a little, but I didn't push Sayu away.

She stayed silent, too, and simply held me in her arms.

I could hear her steady breathing from behind me. But just as I was wondering if she'd already fallen asleep, she whispered, "I said I could stand on my own two feet...but I don't wanna say good-bye to you, Mr. Yoshida."

*She can stand on her own two feet, but she doesn't want to say good-bye.*

Unable to work out what she meant, I struggled to find a response.

"...You won't have to do housework every day, and your brother will be there for you. You'll be okay," I said eventually. I heard Sayu giggle and felt her warm breath against my back.

"When I did housework at your place, Mr. Yoshida, I didn't mind at all."

"Oh?"

"Yeah..... Cooking for someone I love every day made me so happy."

"....."

When she said that, my heart skipped a beat.

Sayu and I had carefully built a trusting relationship. Compared to when I first met her, she had become much more open about her feelings.

However, she'd never used the word *love* so frankly with me before. I knew she didn't mean it in a romantic way, but it still floored me to hear her say it.

"Do you think you'll be okay without me, Mr. Yoshida?" she asked suddenly.

My words caught in my throat.

A life without Sayu.

I tried to imagine what that would be like, but my brain refused to cooperate. When I thought about home, Sayu was always there. She was a part of it.

"...I don't know," I said a little recklessly.

That was how I honestly felt.

As I'd been telling myself, once Sayu was gone, things would just "go back to how they were." I'd been alone before I met her, after all... But that was just on the surface.

I'd now experienced how much warmth Sayu brought to my life. Could I still suck it up and tell myself that things were simply "how they always were"? There was no way to know.

I was certain of only one thing.

"But...I think I'll miss you," I said.

Sayu squeezed me tight again.

"Yeah...I guess you will," she said.

We both fell silent.

Tension was brewing in the room. We both had things we wanted to say, but neither of us had the nerve.

Sayu, nuzzled right up against my back, wiggled restlessly. She would stop for a couple of minutes, then fidget some more, then stop again. Until...

"Mr. Yoshida," she said all at once, loosening her grip. "Turn around."

".....?"

Something about Sayu's tone sounded different. As I wondered what it was...I did as she asked and turned around to face her.

We locked eyes, and I found we were even closer than I'd thought. Sayu's gaze was intense and filled with emotion.

"What is it now?" I asked.

"It's...um...our last night, you know."

"Yeah."

Sayu's eyes darted around the room.

As I was wondering why she was so nervous, she asked, "Why don't we...do it? Just this once."

"Do what?"

"Um, you know.....h-have sex."

".....Huh?"

Even in the dark, I could tell how much she was blushing. I felt my face grow hot, too.

If she had been teasing me, like she so often did, I would've just said something snappy and turned her down. This time, however, it didn't sound like teasing.

For a moment, I imagined having Sayu take off her clothes and touching her body...but I frantically shook that image from my head.

"What the hell are you talking about...?!"

“No, it’s just... I guess I just want...to make sure we won’t forget each other.”

I couldn’t help sighing. It seemed like her loneliness had taken a wrong turn somewhere.

I was mad at myself, too, for letting the mood get to me and starting to imagine things.

“We don’t have to do something like that... I’d never forget you,” I told Sayu, looking straight at her.

She returned my gaze and gasped.

“We’ve spent more than half a year together,” I continued.

Memories of the two of us flooded my mind in sequence, each vanishing just as quickly as they appeared.

“We aren’t lovers, and we aren’t family, and yet we spent more than half a year living together...”

I paused and gently rubbed Sayu’s head.

“I doubt I’ll ever forget you.”

This frank confession brought tears to the corners of Sayu’s eyes. She thrust her face into my chest and threw her arms around me.

“Yeah...me too.”

I carried on stroking her hair as she sniffled. Then, all of a sudden, I laughed.

“I’ve thought this for a while, but...you know what, Sayu? You always look so cool and collected, but you cry so easily. Have you always been such a crybaby?”

“Shut up. A lot of good stuff has happened lately—I can’t help it.”

She kept her face pressed against my chest as her shoulders shook, and she sniffled some more.

For the next few minutes, neither of us said a word.

As I lay next to Sayu in silence, I could clearly feel the warmth of her body. That warmth spread to my heart. The thought of never feeling her warm embrace again did leave me a little lonely.

“Okay,” Sayu said, breaking the silence and looking up at me. “How about you just touch my boobs, then?”

“Not giving in, are you?” I replied with a helpless laugh. Sayu giggled.

Afterward, we slowly drifted off to sleep. We spent our last night together just like that—very close but not overly intimate.

## Chapter 12 Parting

We woke up around nine AM the next morning, and Issa, Sayu, and I left the house together.

I considered saying good-bye to Sayu's mother, but Issa stopped me.

"She seems to be sleeping well today, so let's not wake her," he said.

That was when I remembered him telling me that she always stayed up late, which may have been a roundabout way of saying she had insomnia.

The source of her recent troubles must have been Sayu. She was probably sleeping soundly now that things had been sorted out. In that case, it'd be best not to disturb her.

Besides, I was sure Sayu's mother and I had already said everything we needed to say to each other. We'd both benefit from leaving things on a clear note. There was no need for any unnecessary conversation.

And so we climbed into Issa's car just as we had the day before and made our way to the airport.

I'd initially offered to call a taxi for myself, but both Issa and Sayu had been quite firm in stopping me, and the three of us ended up heading to the airport together.

"You don't have to go all the way to the airport..."

"We couldn't let you leave without giving you a proper send-off," Sayu insisted.

"That's right, Mr. Yoshida. You're like family to Sayu now." Issa paused there for a moment before adding, "If you have time, we'd love for you to come and visit Sayu again."

I couldn't think of a response to his offer.

"Ha-ha, right...", I answered vaguely.

I was sure this would be the last time I saw Sayu.

I got the feeling that if I met up with her again, I'd only get in the way of her progress.

Suddenly, I sensed somebody looking at me from the side. I took a peek in that direction and caught Sayu swiftly averting her gaze.

She fidgeted with her hands on her lap as if she had something to say. But in the end, she kept quiet, looking out the window instead.

As I wondered what she might have been thinking, I happened to take note of her outfit.

"Hey, why are you wearing your uniform?"

Sayu awkwardly turned back toward me and smiled. She looked like I'd caught her out.

"Hmm, I'm not sure... I don't really have a reason. I just thought it'd be nice."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ha-ha. You tell me! I have no idea."

I felt like she was hiding something from me. Still, I didn't feel the need to press her for answers, so I let it go.

After that, the two of us said nothing.

Once we reached the airport, that would be it. We'd say good-bye for real... And yet, Sayu, I, and even Issa spent the rest of the long journey in silence.



There was a lot less tension than the day before, and the car ride felt much shorter.

Before we knew it, we'd arrived at the airport.

I'd booked the flight on my phone in the car, so once I picked up the tickets, all that was left was to fly home.

Sayu followed me all the way from the car to the lobby in silence, a blank expression on her face. Issa was smiling, but he didn't say anything, either.

As soon as we reached the lobby, Sayu turned to Issa and said hesitantly, "Sorry, we were in the car for a while. I'm going to have to use the restroom."

"Sure, go ahead." Issa kindly obliged, pointing her in the right direction.

After looking at Issa and me in turn, Sayu trotted off toward the facilities.

Issa watched as she disappeared, then looked back at me.

“Take this, Mr. Yoshida.”

“...What is it?”

Issa removed an envelope from his breast pocket and handed it to me. It felt pretty heavy.

“Cash for the ticket home,” he stated casually.

“No way,” I said, shaking my head. “Paying for my ticket here was more than enough! Besides, I only booked a seat in economy.”

I made a point of mentioning the economy ticket because, judging by the weight of the envelope, it seemed safe to assume he’d included enough for business class.

“But we owe you so much, Mr. Yoshida. This is merely a show of our gratitude.”

“No, trust me. I can tell you’re grateful. But I’m an adult with a full-time job, so let me handle this.”

Issa was trying pretty forcefully to hand me the envelope, but I somehow managed to push it back.

“If you insist on giving up the money, then please spend it on some new clothes for Sayu,” I suggested.

Issa blinked at me in surprise, then burst out laughing.

“Mr. Yoshida...,” he began. Then he shrugged, looking a little taken aback. “You really have fallen for Sayu, haven’t you?”

I scowled, practically on reflex.

“How could I? She’s a high schooler!”

“Really? I don’t think age matters when it comes to love.”

“I prefer older women.”

It felt strange to say this kind of thing to Sayu’s brother with a straight face, but I didn’t want him to think I was romantically interested in his sister. All the trust I’d worked so hard to earn would go up in smoke.

I thought Issa understood our situation. Why was he teasing me about it now?

As I was pondering this, Issa spoke up again. He was still smiling, but he looked much more serious than before.

“It would be a huge relief to an older brother to know that his little sister was with a man like you, Mr. Yoshida.”

“.....”



It definitely didn't sound like he was joking. I was at a loss for words.

Immediately, I thought of what had happened the night before.

Sayu had proposed that we have sex as a kind of final memory together. There had been something different about her then, and for a moment, I'd almost imagined what it would have been like.

Of course...in the end, I couldn't envision it. That was the truth. Whatever the case, I simply didn't see Sayu in a sexual light. Thinking she was a cute girl and embracing her as a lover, as Issa was suggesting, were two very different things.

"...I'd appreciate if you wouldn't say things like that, even as a joke," I finally managed.

Issa breathed a little sigh and grinned at me.

"Well, if you insist, I'll leave it at that," he said, still smiling. Then he straightened and addressed me. "Thank you very much, Mr. Yoshida."

Issa lowered his head in a bow.

"Sayu is finally moving forward—and all because she met you. If it had been anyone else, things would have ended very differently. She would never have been able to come this far." When he raised his head, his expression was dead serious. "I don't expect you ever intended to meet Sayu. If you hadn't gotten drunk or you'd headed home a little earlier, you might never have met her at all."

When I heard Issa say this, I realized something for the first time.

If I hadn't gone on a date with Ms. Gotou or been rejected by her, or if I'd gone straight home without calling Hashimoto, I might have never met Sayu.

In that case, what would have become of me? And where would Sayu have ended up instead?

I got chills just thinking about it.

"Still...I have to show my appreciation somehow," Issa said, reaching out to shake my hand. "Thank you for finding Sayu."

"...Of course." I nodded, gripping the hand he'd offered.

After a few shakes, Issa flashed me a thin smile and said, "This might be selfish of me to say, but..."

"Yeah?"

I looked away from our clasped hands and up at his face. He seemed a little flustered but carried on.

“I’m sure it would make Sayu happy...if meeting her meant a lot to you, too.”

I took a moment to think about this. It went without saying that meeting Sayu had been a positive development in my life.

“Well... I’ll make sure to tell her how I feel directly,” I said.

He grinned and exhaled a puff of air from his nose. He must have guessed what I was suggesting.

“Right, that’s a good idea... I’ll leave you to it, then.” He bowed again. “Thank you so very much. Take care on your way home.”

“Same to you. Thank you for everything.”

We exchanged smiles and more bows.

Then Issa turned on his heel and started back toward the entrance.

I let out a slow breath as I watched him disappear. This was probably the last time I’d see him, too.

Thanks to Sayu, I’d ended up meeting the CEO of a frozen foods company whose meals I’d occasionally eaten, and we’d become close enough to part with smiles on our faces. Now that I reflected on it properly, it was pretty unbelievable. That kind of thing definitely didn’t happen every day.

But we didn’t meet because I’d done something impressive—it was simply by chance. I had met Sayu, and that had led me to meet Issa. That was all there was to it.

“Sorry I took so long, Mr. Yoshida.”

Just as Issa disappeared out of sight, Sayu came back from the restroom.

“Wait, where’s my brother?” she asked.

“He went back to the car.”

“Oh, okay.”

Something about the way Sayu was talking to me felt stiff and awkward.

Now that we were alone, I wasn’t sure what to say.

“...Well, this really is good-bye, huh?” Sayu said, breaking the silence.

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Make sure to keep up with the housework, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.”

For some reason, the idea that Sayu was concerned about my well-being seemed ridiculous. I burst out laughing and nodded. Seeing this, she broke into a grin.

“...Good luck with school,” I said.

She bobbed her head up and down, her smile gentle.

“Yeah...I’ll do my best. I’m almost a whole year behind now, so I have to.”

She paused there and smiled again, but it looked a little forced. I could tell she was only putting on a brave face, but I was happy she was able to smile, considering the situation.

And yet...I wasn’t sure what to say next. We faced each other in silence as my boarding time drew nearer.

Finally, Sayu spoke up.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

My gaze had been wandering, but I shifted it back to Sayu and locked eyes with her. She was staring straight at me.

The look in her eyes was different now. I could see a powerful heat within them, and I unconsciously sucked in my breath.

“I’m glad I ran away,” she said firmly, “because that’s how I met you, Mr. Yoshida.”

I felt like I’d heard her say those words before. But this time, it hit me much harder.

Perhaps it was because we were about to say good-bye, or perhaps there was some other reason. I couldn’t be sure.

“Last night, just before I fell asleep, I started wondering what would have happened if I’d met you some other way—if you’d been my classmate, my upperclassman, or part of my family...”

There was a desperation in Sayu’s tone as she spoke.

I began to imagine some of the possibilities she’d proposed. What would have happened if she’d been my classmate or a student in my school or a member of my family...?

I tried, but I couldn’t quite picture it.

“But none of those things felt right. I’m glad I met you the way I did, Mr. Yoshida.”

Just as she said this, I reached the exact same conclusion.

It was difficult to imagine meeting Sayu in a different place or in a different situation. If we *had* met under different circumstances, I wasn’t sure we would have had quite the same impact on each other.

“I’m glad I met you as an office worker with a beard,” she admitted candidly, “and not as a classmate or a relative.”

Her gaze was full of emotion.

“I’m glad...I met you at this time in my life, when I was still wearing my school uniform.”

She smiled gently, and I found myself nodding in agreement.

“Me too.”

*Oh right*, I thought. I’d spoken to Issa about it only moments earlier, but as soon as I was alone with Sayu, I’d completely forgotten what I was supposed to say.

I had to tell her what our meeting meant to me. It seemed to me like the most important thing I could do before we went our separate ways.

“I’m...so glad I met you, too. Thanks to you...I know myself a little better.”

Ever since I met Sayu, I’d been in one confusing situation after another.

I’d learned that the conventional notions of right and wrong I’d always believed in weren’t all there was to life. I’d also discovered how truly little you can do for another person and...how valuable it is to put real effort into communicating with them.

“...Oh, I see.”

Sayu sounded a little embarrassed, but her lips turned up, and she nodded.

Once again, silence fell between us. Sayu kept looking up at me and then down again, as if there was something she wanted to say.

Eventually, she made up her mind, nodded once, and began to speak.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

“What is it?”

She faced me head-on and fixed me with her gaze.

“I love you, Mr. Yoshida.”

For a brief moment, it felt like all the other sounds around us faded, and her words were all I could hear.

I felt goose bumps rise on my skin as I turned what she’d said over and over in my mind.

I’d heard her clearly. We were looking right at each other, and I could see how serious her expression was.

Judging by what I saw, I hadn't misunderstood her. And yet, somehow, it didn't feel real.

A high school girl had just admitted she had feelings for me.

I was silent for a few seconds before I finally managed to ask, "...Are you crazy?"

I said this in the same playfully dismissive tone I'd used so often in the past. But Sayu's expression didn't change, and she simply shook her head.

"I'm being serious."

"....."

I felt bad for teasing her at such a vulnerable moment, but I didn't know what else to do.

Sayu had just told me she loved me. And she'd meant it in a romantic way.

Thinking back on it, I realized Sayu's behavior the night before had been strange. Suggesting that we have sex because it was our last night together...was a step too far, no matter how lonely she might feel without me.

If her actions had been motivated by these feelings, on the other hand, then everything would make much more sense.

I thought back on what Issa had said earlier.

*"You really have fallen for Sayu, haven't you?"*

...If that were really the case, things might have ended in a much simpler, happier way.

"...I'm not into kids."

I turned her down the same way I had all those months ago.

Our relationship had changed so much since then, but I still couldn't imagine us together like that.

She may have been serious about me, but for better or worse, I couldn't reciprocate her feelings.

"You're a cute girl. You really are. But...I just can't see you like that," I said bluntly.

She smiled quietly, like she'd known exactly what I would say.

Her next line sounded preprepared, too.

"Then does that mean...I'll have a chance when I'm older?" she asked with a spirited grin.

I laughed despite myself, nodding a few times.

“Once you’re a full-grown adult, *maybe*.”

In all honesty, I couldn’t begin to imagine what Sayu might look like when she was older. But I also didn’t see the point in brushing her off entirely, considering the situation.

As soon as she heard my indecisive reply, Sayu wiped the smile off her face and once again put on a serious expression.

Staring into my eyes, she said, “All right, then... Wait for me, okay?”

She was serious, and I could tell from her expression that she wanted a reply. I suddenly regretted everything I’d thought and said just a few seconds earlier.

Either way, my response would be a definite “no.” I knew I wouldn’t change my mind, but for some reason, I’d interpreted Sayu’s feelings as a little kid’s cute crush and tried to dismiss them gently.

Sayu, however, was serious.

There was only one way to answer such a heartfelt confession. I had to be sincere and straightforward.

“...I’m not gonna wait for you,” I said. “By the time you’re a proper adult, I won’t just be an old geezer anymore—I’ll have one foot in the grave.”

It was only a few years until Sayu would be considered a legal adult, but that wasn’t what either of us was talking about.

Assuming adulthood began not when she graduated high school but when she achieved independence and the ability to take care of herself, it was still a long way off, regardless of whether she decided to go to college.

By that time, I’d be even older—well into my thirties, with my forties just around the corner.

I was sure Sayu would find someone else in the meantime. If I carelessly told her that I would wait for her, that promise might hang over her life like a curse.

I gently placed a hand on top of her head and stroked her hair.

“...You’ve still got a long life ahead of you. You should wait until you’re an adult before you decide what you want to do. So...” I looked straight into her eyes—I could see them shimmering with emotion. “So tuck away your memories of me...and start a new life.”

Now she was even more worked up, and the corners of her eyes grew moist. Despite this, she frowned and shook her head, fighting back the

tears.

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t. I won’t.”

She took a step toward me and grabbed my hand.

“Ms. Gotou told me that high school is a really special, once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

I listened, wondering why she was bringing this up all of a sudden.

“And I’ve spent a sixth of that time with you, Mr. Yoshida.” She smiled again. “With memories this important, you can’t just pack them up and put them behind you. That’s why...”

She squeezed my hand tightly before continuing.

“...even if you don’t wait for me, I’ll come and find you.”

Her words shook me to the core.

I never expected to see her again, but Sayu had the opposite idea.

She was telling me that even after she became an adult and had all the freedom that entailed, she still wanted to come and see me.

The moment I opened my mouth to reply, the airport intercom sounded.

It was a warning that the flight I’d booked was boarding soon.

The time had come for us to say good-bye.

“Okay,” I told Sayu, nodding firmly. “I won’t wait for you. But...” I placed my hand on her head again and rustled her hair. “If there’s a chance we’ll meet again...I guess I’ll look forward to that.”

Sayu’s eyes overflowed with emotion. This time, I saw the tears that had welled up in her eyes stream down her cheeks. She was a true crybaby, right to the bitter end.

“Okay... See you, then.”

I raised a hand to wave good-bye.

Sayu wiped her tears on the sleeve of her uniform and gave me a great big smile.

“Okay... See you!”

She waved back at me, fresh tears pouring from her eyes.

I turned my back to her, then started walking toward the terminal.

We’d finally bid farewell to our life together.

I could feel the loneliness swirling in my chest.

But I was sure this feeling was only temporary. Once I got home and went to work the next day—just like I always did—things would begin to go back to the way they were before.

All of us were trying our best to deal with what was happening right now. Over time, though, those powerful emotions would fade and become only sweet memories.

Sayu's feelings for me were probably the same.





Once she restarted her life as a high schooler, she'd meet other people, and maybe she'd even have a full-fledged relationship with one of them. She'd have a lot more in common with someone like that—someone closer to home.

I seriously doubted she'd come back to visit me to pursue a romantic relationship. And even if she did, I might be involved with someone else at

that point.

And yet...

I had a brief urge to turn back. But I squashed it and kept moving forward.

I wanted to see the adult Sayu would become. That, at least, I knew for sure. I wanted to see her again once she'd grown up...when she'd taken control of her life and found her own answers.

As much as I hoped it would happen, I knew that, realistically, it wouldn't. These two feelings were mixing together inside me to produce the helpless sense of loneliness I was experiencing.

I remembered how I'd said "*See you*" to Sayu.

She had said the same thing back to me. We'd parted with the mutual hope that one day we'd see each other again. Maybe it wouldn't be so strange if, by some coincidence, we really did reunite.

With that optimistic thought in mind, I finished checking in and headed toward the gate.

But just before I went through it, I found myself looking back over my shoulder. The airport was full of people rushing to and fro, but Sayu was nowhere to be seen.

With a mix of relief and disappointment, I chuckled softly, though I wasn't entirely sure why.

Stomping my feet loudly as I walked, I proceeded toward the plane.

It was time to go home—back to a life without Sayu.



"Welcome back."

"...Hi."

When Sayu reached the car, she was weirdly calm.

"Are you ready to go, then?" I asked.

"Sure."

"You can wait until the plane takes off if you want."

"Nah."

She sat in the passenger seat and buckled her seat belt.



“...Should we go straight home? Did you want to stop anywhere?”

“Home’s fine.”

“...Okay, then.”

With that, I started the engine.

She’d called it “*home*.” That meant she recognized the house where she lived with our mother as her own home.

This brought me great relief. And yet, at the same time, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was mostly thanks to the person she'd just said good-bye to.

I pulled the car out of the airport parking lot and onto the road, which felt strangely wide and open.

Glancing at Sayu out of the corner of my eye, I saw she was leaning her head against the window, the right side of her face covered by her hair.

But I could see her reflection clearly in the glass. It was obvious she'd been crying a lot.

"...You'll miss him, won't you?" I whispered, and her head dipped in a nod.

"Did you get to tell him everything you wanted to in the end?" I asked.

I realized this probably wasn't the best time to make conversation, but I couldn't help it.

For a long while, Sayu simply carried on sniffing to herself, not saying a word.

I wasn't going to force her to answer, so I just focused on driving. But then...

"...It's not the end," she said at last.

Somehow, that answer told me all I needed to know about the strength of her feelings for him.

"...I see," I said, blowing a puff of air through my nose. "Well...you'd better work hard, then."

Once again, her head bent forward in a nod.

I really was envious of this Mr. Yoshida. He'd carefully healed my sister's wounds—the ones I'd struggled for years to fix—and now he'd even become the goal she was working toward.

I gripped the steering wheel and snorted.

Sayu seemed like a quiet person, but she was actually quite stubborn. Once she decided to do something, she always found the strength to see it through. I didn't know where that strength came from. But as long as that momentum drove her forward, I knew she'd be okay.

"...I can't wait to see how things turn out in a few years," I murmured to myself under the sound of the engine.

Now it was time to think through everything I could do to help my little sister when she inevitably announced she'd be going to Tokyo.

Thinking about my family's future had never felt so fun.

## Chapter 13 Living

I undid the lock and opened the front door.

“I’m back,” I called out as I walked inside. I was immediately greeted by an intense feeling of unease.

All the lights in my apartment were off. I was standing in total darkness. No one called out “Welcome home!”

“Oh... Right.”

I slowly removed my shoes, headed into the living room, and turned on the light.

Then I sat down on my bed and sighed deeply.

“No more Sayu...”

I wanted to laugh at myself. Why was I saying this out loud when there was no one else around?

I chuckled, unable to hold back the urge, then hopped off the bed.

“Yeah... It was always like this.”

I paced around my coffee table restlessly, muttering to myself.

I’d spent years in this apartment, but for some reason, it almost didn’t feel like my home anymore.

I walked around and around.

“Ha-ha...”

Eventually, I slumped down and sat on the floor.

“I guess this place was bigger than I thought...”

I was speaking pretty loudly, but the words seemed to disappear into thin air, as if the emptiness of the room had swallowed them up. I’d always thought of my apartment as cramped, but now it felt like there was a little *too* much space.

I was astonished by the extent to which Sayu's absence was eating away at me, filling me with unease.

This was how things had always been before. I kept reminding myself of that, but it was no use. I never expected it to be so hard to go back to my previous way of life.

For a long time...I sat there on the floor in a daze.

*Get a grip*, I thought. *Get changed or take a bath, at least...* I heaved myself up and opened the closet.

But opening the closet just made me feel even more ill at ease. The corner where all of Sayu's clothes had been was now empty.

We'd spent a long time here together, and Sayu had accumulated more and more things. It had eventually reached the point where, now that all of it was gone, I felt uncomfortable in my own home.

But I quickly saw that her part of the closet wasn't *entirely* bare.

*...What's this?*

In the place where all her clothes had been lay a neatly folded T-shirt.

It was probably the shirt she always slept in—part of the sweat suit I'd bought her when she'd first arrived.

"Did she forget it...?" I wondered aloud, but I soon realized how unlikely it was that she'd remember to pack everything except this one shirt.

When I picked it up and spread it out, something fell from one of its creases.

It was a page of stationery paper.

I picked it up without so much as a thought. The round letters on the page looked like Sayu's handwriting.

***Here's something that smells of me. Never forget it, okay?***

Normally, I would have spent a lot of time overthinking everything, but now I immediately brought the shirt up to my nose.

After taking a whiff, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Your smell...is just my detergent."

It was ridiculous.

My hand trembled as I gripped the T-shirt.

It smelled no different from any of the clothes I was wearing. And yet, visions of Sayu's smile began flooding into my mind.

“Why...?” I groaned, heading for the kitchen.

I filled a pot with water and lit the stove.

As the liquid boiled, I saw Sayu’s various expressions and remembered the things we used to chat about. It all spun around in my head, each scene vanishing as quickly as it had appeared.

I took the miso paste out of the fridge and added it to the water once it was hot enough.

When the miso soup was finished, I scooped the broth with a ladle and brought it to my mouth. I hadn’t even added any ingredients.

*“How is it?”*

Sayu had asked me that the day after we met. Her words echoed inside my mind.

“Ha-ha...”

As I stood there, my vision began to blur.

“...This tastes awful.....”

Unable to bear it any longer, I found myself squatting on the ground. My shoulders started to tremble.

My homemade miso soup was so much saltier than the kind I’d grown used to. It made me feel miserable.

“Your miso soup...really was the best...”

The moment those words left my lips, the tears that had welled up in my eyes began to pour down my face.

Sayu was gone. She’d set off on her own journey.

I, too, needed to start back on my own path. And yet...

“I’m the one who’s struggling...”

I was sad, lonely, and bitter.

Overcome with emotion, all I could do was shake. My body felt like it was on fire.

“This is the worst...”

I couldn’t seem to erase her from my life.

Without Sayu, my apartment felt too big for one person...and in her absence, I felt her presence even more strongly.

Now that she was gone, I was finally able to see how big a role she’d played in my life.



“It shouldn’t be like this...!” I wailed, despite myself.

After meeting Sayu and getting to know her, I’d decided I wanted to help her return to her old life.

We’d both worked hard and finally accomplished that goal.

Even if I’d messed up, failed, and landed in a tough spot, it wouldn’t have bothered me. I’d only be getting what I deserved.

But it wasn’t supposed to be like *this*.

This should have been the best outcome for both of us. We’d poured everything into achieving the thing we wanted most, so why was I in so much pain?

Did Sayu feel this same sadness—the kind that makes you want to scream—when she saw me off at the airport? Did she smile and wave good-bye in spite of what she was feeling?

In that case...

“I’m...way more of a kid...than she is!”

I’d put up a front around Sayu, but as soon as I was alone, I started bawling like a baby. I was pathetic.

I was so incredibly lonely without her around that I felt like I was going to lose my mind.

...This was how things had always been.

As I continued to cry my eyes out, I grew more and more exhausted. Eventually, I staggered over to the bed and was out like a light.



“Hey, Mr. Yoshida.”

“What’s up?”

“Make sure you cook proper meals for yourself, okay?”

“...We’ll see. I’ll give it a shot, but I think that’s a little beyond me.”

“Ha-ha, I see. Well, remember not to oversleep on workdays.”

“That...might be a challenge, too. You’ve been my human alarm clock for so long.”

“No excuses. You’re going to have to live properly on your own now. I’ll try my best to do the same.”

“You’ll have your mom and brother, though. You won’t be totally alone.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But it’s not like you’re alone, either.”

"I'm not?"

"...You've got me. I might not be with you in person, but I'll still be there for you."

"...I guess you're right."

"Yep."

"I...guess I'll be okay, then."

"You will. And so will I."

"Yeah... Okay, then."

"Yep... Guess I'll see you around."

"Yeah... See you."

\*

I woke to the sound of my alarm.

After sitting up, I looked around the room. The futon that had always stayed laid out on the floor was nowhere to be seen, and I couldn't hear anyone moving around.

"...Oh. That's right," I murmured, getting out of bed.

I felt like I'd been dreaming.

I was surprised by how quickly my alarm woke me up, considering how long it'd been since I used it.

I'd set numerous alarms at five-minute intervals, starting an hour before I was supposed to get up. Since I'd managed to wake up with the first one, I stood around idly in the apartment, then took a cigarette out onto the veranda.

The click of the Zippo lighter reverberated in the suburban morning air. I took a drag on my cigarette, then exhaled.

This was part of my usual routine, but for some reason, it felt lonelier now.

I was alone.

I was alone now.

With each puff of smoke I exhaled, I felt closer to accepting reality.

What would Sayu think when she woke up in her house that morning? Would she feel lonely like I did?

I laughed at myself for even considering it.

"Ha... I'm such an idiot."

I put out the cigarette and went back inside.

“...Guess I’ll make some breakfast,” I mumbled, opening the notebook full of recipes Sayu had left on the table.

I was going to be all right.

We both would be.

As I traced my finger across the surface of the notebook, I felt the intense loneliness I’d experienced the night before slowly begin to fade away.

That day, Sayu would be taking her first steps toward the future. I had to do the same.

“Okay.”

I stood up and went over to the fridge, but when I opened the door, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“...I guess this will do for today.”

The shelves were full to the brim with preprepared side dishes.

I couldn’t believe she had the gall to coddle me like that right off the bat. Whatever happened to encouraging my independence?

Still thinking about this, I headed for the washroom and looked in the mirror.

When I touched my chin, I felt stubble scratch against my fingers.

I would shave every day. I’d go to work, earn a paycheck, and come home. Then I’d eat dinner and go to bed.

Before I met Sayu, that had been nothing more than a “routine” for me. Now I’d come to view it as my way of life.

“...Ha-ha.”

Laughing to myself, I took out my electric razor.

Everything I did reminded me of the person who was no longer by my side. Each time, it made me painfully aware that I was now living alone.

“...Gotta keep trying,” I muttered, turning on the razor.

Just like that, my paid vacation ended the very next day, and I returned to my old life.

Once I took that first step, I soon grew used to life without Sayu. It was disappointing how quickly it happened. But after all, I was just going back to how things used to be.

I wasn’t anyone’s guardian. I was just an employee at an IT company.

And yet, from time to time...my home felt empty.

When I took a bath, for example.

When I did the laundry.

And when I occasionally tried cooking for myself.

At times like those...I'd think of her—that high school girl and her distinctive smile.

## Epilogue

“Does anyone have any questions so far?” asked Mishima.

Her voice was clear as she looked around the meeting room from her place in front of the projector.

The idea she’d just presented was generally well thought out, but I still shot up my hand. She looked annoyed for a moment, but she pointed at me anyway.

“Yes, Mr. Yoshida?”

“First off, it’s good that you’ve set out the workload and deadlines with reasonable margins.”

“...Thank you? But, um, I was asking if anyone had any questions...”

“That being said, we’ve never worked with this kind of plan before. So I’d like to know how you calculated the margins and if someone supervised the plan.”

“Ahhh,” said Mishima, nodding confidently. “There shouldn’t be any problems. The Sendai branch already implemented this policy a few years ago.”

“Sendai?”

“The branch I used to work at.” Kanda raised her hand, coming to the rescue.

“Oh... Is that why you’re...?” Putting two and two together, I looked over at Kanda. She quickly nodded.

“That’s right. I was instrumental in implementing it over there, and since this plan is so similar, I’m helping Ms. Mishima out as her supervisor.”

I had wondered why Kanda was at the meeting—she usually worked on different jobs in another section. But it all made sense now.

“Does the workload look okay to you, Kanda?” I asked her, pointing at the documents in front of me just to check.

“Yeah, this schedule gives us plenty of time,” she answered right away. “Ms. Mishima asked me about it beforehand, too.”

She gazed up at Mishima, who scratched the tip of her nose, looking slightly embarrassed.

“In that case, I think we’re just about done here,” I said.

Mishima breathed a sigh of relief. “It’s agreed, then. As long as nobody has anything else to add, I’ll move on to the next item.”

She looked around the room and waited to see if anyone else was going to put their hand up. Nobody did, so she moved along with the policy meeting.

Seeing her conduct the meeting like a pro was making me a little emotional.



“I can’t believe Mishima is actually in charge of a project,” Hashimoto said as he poked at his fried rice in the cafeteria. “That would’ve been unthinkable a few years ago.”

“Right? I guess all my mentoring finally paid off,” I replied, slurping at my usual bowl of Chinese noodles.

Mishima grimaced openly.

“Stop exaggerating.”

“Back then, you were always focused on slacking off,” I pointed out.

Mishima bit her tongue as she used her chopsticks to pick apart her grilled salmon.

“Well...I’ve turned over a new leaf.”

“...Seems like it.”

I could more or less guess what had caused her change of heart. A lot had happened between us over the past few years.

“I thought it was about time I tried enjoying my work, that’s all! But more importantly, I know I can count on you two to support me whenever I run into trouble.” She spoke enthusiastically, then began chewing away at her salmon.

Hashimoto seemed to find this amusing, and his shoulders shook with laughter. After a few moments, though, he followed suit and focused on eating his fried rice.

The employees under my supervision had grown a lot in the last few years, and I felt like my job was a little easier for it.

I would turn twenty-eight that year. My thirties were just around the corner...

I had a rewarding job, and I was enjoying life... But I still found myself harboring feelings for the great love of my life—the same one I'd been pining after for years.

"Good work today, Yoshida."

Just as I was getting ready to head home at the end of my shift, Ms. Gotou came over to me. These days, she had been going out of her way to visit my desk instead of calling me over to hers.

"You too," I replied. "What's up?"

"I was just wondering if you were free later."

"Uh...do you mean for dinner?" I asked, and she nodded vigorously.

She'd started inviting me out to eat more often, and I would regularly take the initiative and ask her out, too.

We weren't a couple yet, but it felt like we were getting there.

As nice as it was for her to invite me out for dinner, though, I'd already made plans for the evening.

"I'm sorry. I'd love to, but today isn't the best day..."

"Oh, do you have something to do?"

"Yeah. Somebody from my neighborhood wanted to meet up."

"Hmph. All right, then," she said.

For a moment, she looked like she wanted to ask me something, but she soon gave up, sighed, and nodded.

"Can't argue with that," she said. "I'll catch you another time, then. Have a good night."

"You too! See you!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ms. Gotou turn on her heel and head back to her desk. I bit my bottom lip, feeling a pang of regret.

I'd turned her down because Asami had invited me out.

I was just as surprised as anyone that Asami and I still kept in touch. We even met up every now and then.

Asami was now in college. She was studying literature, and occasionally, she'd invite herself over to my place and make me read a story she'd written.

That was probably what was going to happen today.

To be honest, I wasn't that interested in reading fiction. I'd much rather go out to dinner with Ms. Gotou... But I always prioritized the plans I'd made first, and that wasn't about to change.

"I'm heading out!" I said as I made my way to the door.

Once I'd left the office, I hurried straight home.

Asami's writing aside, I did enjoy hearing about her life in college. Whenever I spoke to her, I imagined what a certain other "high school girl" might be getting up to now.



I got off the train at my local station and sent Asami a message as I began the walk home.

**Where should we meet?**

I could see the "Read" notice pop up immediately, and a few seconds later, I got a reply.

**Your place is fine.**

Over the past few years, Asami had...mellowed out in a lot of ways.

She'd stopped calling me "Yoshi," and her hair was now a muted shade of brown... Most notably, however, she'd adopted a more natural way of speaking.

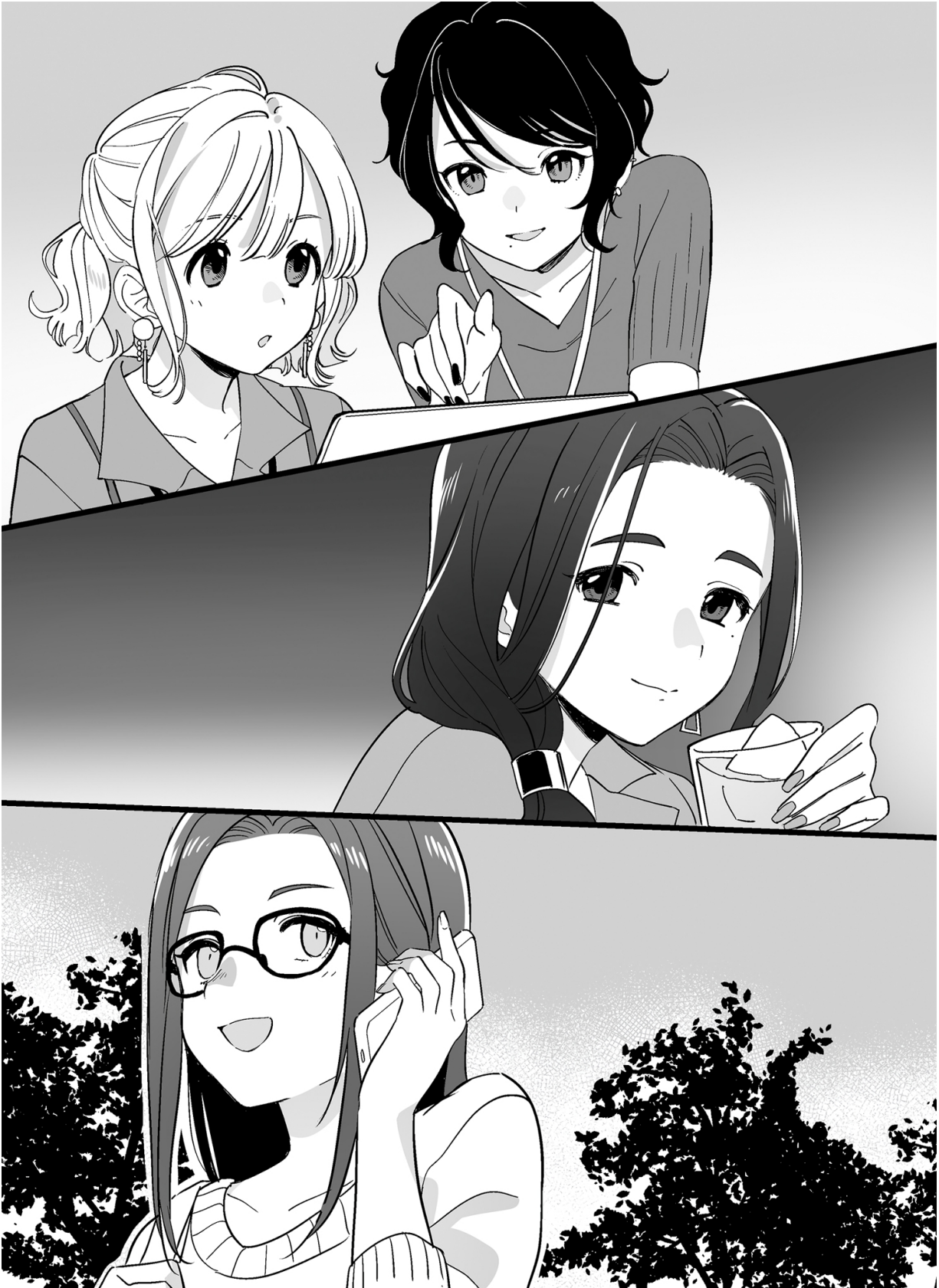
I had no idea what caused this change...but she seemed more comfortable when she spoke, which could only be a good thing.

**Gotcha.**

Seconds after I sent this reply, another message came from Asami.

**Are you almost here?**





I cocked my head to one side as I read it.

**Yeah. Are you already there?**

The moment I answered her, my smartphone started to vibrate. She was calling me.

“What now?”

I tapped the screen to accept the call.

*“Did you get to the station already?”*

“I’m walking home now.”

*“Oh, okay! That was quick. You haven’t bought dinner, have you?”*

“I was just gonna throw something together at home. Did you want some?”

*“Oh, sure! That works for me! Just head on back, then. I’ll wait for ya!”*

“Okay... Huh? ...She hung up on me.”

I frowned and tucked my phone back in my pocket, mildly irritated that she’d cut off the call with no warning. This wasn’t the first time, either. She often got in touch just to say her piece, without sparing any thought for what *I* might want to ask.

I’d hoped to find out if she was already at my apartment...but in the end, it didn’t really matter. If she was there, she was there; if she wasn’t, I could take my time getting changed.

As I pondered these possibilities and made my way through the neighborhood, I spotted something so strange that it made me stop in my tracks.

Not too far in the distance, I could see somebody huddled beneath a telephone pole.

Without thinking, I sucked in a deep breath.

I’d seen this person before.

It was a beautiful woman dressed in a smart, grown-up outfit. Her silky dark hair—almost chestnut—glistened in the lamplight. She wore only light makeup, but that was more than enough to accentuate her pretty face.

She was totally different from the girl I remembered, and yet I knew—I knew it was her.

Everything felt surreal as I slowly made my way toward the telephone pole.

Then I called out to her.

“...What are you doing out this late?” I asked, and the woman immediately looked up.

“You’ve got a bit of a beard now, huh?” she replied with a smile.

“...I shave it in the morning, but it grows right back by the end of the day.”

“I see. So you’re shaving every day, huh?”

“Yeah. Someone once told me I didn’t look good with a beard.”

She chuckled. “I bet they did.”

Her shoulders shook with laughter for a moment, then she looked straight at me.

I looked straight at her, too.

“That outfit looks good on you.”

“Right? It’s my favorite,” she said, pinching the hem of her mature, stylish dress. She was dressed like a woman, and she looked the part, too.

Things were totally different from when we’d first met. And yet, I was gripped by overwhelming nostalgia.

“Mr. Yoshida,” the woman slowly began.

“We’re together again.”

I felt a warmth in the depths of my heart. Part of me had probably always been waiting for this day to arrive.

We’d met by chance, then gone our separate, solitary ways.

Now we’d met again.

This meeting, though, wasn’t a coincidence.

We were able to cross paths once more. But this time, we knew where we were going in life.

I never imagined that would bring me so much joy and so much pride.

“That’s right... We’re together again, Sayu.”

When I called her name, she smiled shyly.

Then, with a mischievous look on her face, she said, “Let me stay with you, Mister.”

I burst out laughing, then I nodded.



“There’s a noisy brat at my place right now, though. Is that all right?”

“Of course.”

We smiled at each other, both thinking of the pesky college girl who’d probably set this whole thing up.

What role did Sayu have in my life?

As much as I’d tried to forget her, she had always been on my mind. And yet, I still couldn’t answer that question.

Had she found her proof? Had she been able to prove that meeting me had been a good thing?

I wanted to sit back, relax, and listen to what she had to say.

I was still living my life, and she was, too.

Even without my stubble and her high school uniform, I knew that we had an irrevocable place in each other’s hearts. It was warm, persistent, and irreplaceable.

On the long road ahead of me, I would clutch our shared history tightly... and continue moving forward.

I really hoped that Sayu felt the same.

“Hey,” she whispered from beside me.

She cast a sidelong glance my way and said:

“I’m home, Mr. Yoshida.”

And then she flashed me her usual, silly grin.

*The End*



## Afterword

Yoshida is a hypocrite with bankrupt morals, and yet he tries, as an adult, to help out someone else. He's a totally hopeless guy. And that hopeless guy was able to help Sayu, a girl full of despair and contradictions, find salvation.

I think all meetings between two people come about through this kind of miraculous balance.

*If I hadn't met that person at that exact time...*

And a series of such meetings makes up our lives.

I hope from the bottom of my heart that this story has been such a meeting for you.

Editor W, who saw potential in me.

Editor S, who encouraged me with a lovely smile.

Editor K, who cheered me on.

Editor S, who watched over me patiently.

Chief Editor K, who kindly listened to my worries and offered me advice.

Editor N, who always prioritized my feelings over the circumstances.

Illustrator booota, who blew life into the characters.

Imaru Adachi, who lent her talents to both the manga version and the illustrations in the fourth volume of the novel.

Everyone in sales who did their best to market this story.

Everyone who helped with proofreading.

The staff who poured their everything into making the anime adaptation.

The voice actors who lent their voices to the characters for the anime.

All my friends who supported me.

My family who encouraged me.  
And...to all of you who read all the way to the end.  
Everyone, thank you so very much.  
Meeting all of you has brought great happiness to my life.  
I sincerely hope you feel the same.  
  
And with that, I hope we meet again someday.

*Shimesaba*



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